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THE REVENGE OF THE ROSE

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ELRIC RETURNS—IN HIS NEWEST, MOST HAUNTING ADVENTURE!

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THE REVENGE OF THE ROSE

THE REVENGE OF THE ROSE (1991)

For Christopher Lee—
Arioch awaits thee!

For Johnny and Edgar Winter—
rock on!

For Anthony Skene—
in gratitude.

Elric could enjoy the tranquility of Tanelorn only briefly and then must begin his restless journeyings again. This time he headed eastward, into the lands known as the Valederian Directorates, where he had heard of a certain globe said to display the nations of the future. In that globe he hoped to learn something of his own fate, but in seeking it he earned the enmity of that ferocious horde known as the Haghan'iin Host, who captured and tortured him a little before he escaped and joined forces with the nobles of Anakhazhan to do battle with them …

—The Chronicle of the Black Sword

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BOOK ONE

CONCERNING THE FATE OF EMPIRES

"*What? Do you call us decadent, and our whole nation, too?*
My friend, you are too stern-hearted for these times. These times are new.
Should you discern in us a selfish introspection; a powerless pride:
In actuality, self-mockery and old age's wisdom is all that you descry!"

—Wheldrake,
Byzantine Conversations

CHAPTER ONE

Of Love, Death, Battle & Exile; The White Wolf Encounters a Not Entirely Unwelcome Echo of the Past.

FROM THE UNLIKELY peace of Tanelorn, out of Bas'lk and Nishvalni-Oss, from Valederia, ever eastward runs the White Wolf of Melniboné, howling his red and hideous song, to relish the sweetness of a bloodletting …

… It is over. The albino prince sits bowed upon his horse, as if beneath the weight of his own exaggerated battle-lust; as if ashamed to look upon such profoundly unholy butchery.

Of the mighty Haghan'iin Host not a single soul survived an hour beyond the certain victory they had earlier celebrated. (How could they not win, when Lord Elric's army was a fragment of their own strength?)

Elric feels no further malice towards them, but he knows little pity, either. In their puissant arrogance, their blindness to the wealth of sorcery Elric commanded, they had been unimaginative. They had guffawed at his warnings. They had jeered at their former prisoner for a weakling freak of nature. Such violent, silly creatures deserved only the general grief reserved for all misshaped souls.

Now the White Wolf stretches his lean body, his pale arms. He pushes up his black helm. He rests, panting, in his great painted war-saddle, then takes the murmuring hellblade he carries and sheathes the sated iron into the softness of its velvet scabbard. There is a sound at his back. He turns brooding crimson eyes upon the face of the woman who reins up her horse beside him. Both woman and stallion have the same unruly pride, both seem excited by their unlooked-for victory; both are beautiful.

The albino reaches to take her ungloved hand and kiss it. "We share honours this day, Countess Guyë."

And his smile is a thing to fear and to adore.

"Indeed, Lord Elric!" She draws on her gauntlet and takes her prancing mount in check. "But for the fecundity of thy sorcery and the courage of my soldiery, we'd both be Chaos-meat tonight—and unlucky if still alive!"

He answers with a sigh and an affirmative gesture. She speaks with deep satisfaction.

"The host shall waste no other lands, and its women in their home-trees shall bear no more brutes to bloody the world." Throwing back her heavy cloak, she slings her slender shield behind her. Her long hair catches the evening light, deep vermilion, restless as the ocean as she laughs, while her blue eyes weep; for she had begun the day in the fullest expectation that the best she could hope for was sudden death. "We are deeply in your debt, sir. We are obligated, all of us. You shall be known throughout Anakhazhan as a hero."

Elric's smile is ungrateful. "We came together for mutual needs, madam. I was but settling a small debt with my captors."

"There are other means of settling such debts, sir. We are still obliged."

"I would not take credit," he insists, "for altruism that is no part of my nature." He looks away into the horizon where a purple scar washed with red disguises the falling of the sun.

"I have a different sense of it." She speaks softly, for a hush is coming to the field, and a light breeze tugs at matted hair, bits of bloody fabric, torn skin. There are precious weapons and metals and jewels to be seen, especially where the Haghan'iin nobles had tried to make their escape, but not one of Countess Guyë's sworders, mercenary or free Anakhazhani, will approach the booty. There is a general tendency amongst these weary soldiers to drop back as far as possible from the field. Their captains neither question them on this

nor do they try to stop them. “I have the sense, sir, that you serve some Cause or Principle, nonetheless.”

He is quick to shake his head, his posture in the saddle one of growing impatience. “I am for no master nor moral persuasion. I am for myself. What your yearning soul, madam, might mistake for loyalty to person or Purpose is merely a firm and, aye, *principled* determination to accept responsibility only for myself and my own actions.”

She offers him a quick, girlish look of puzzled disbelief, then turns away with a dawning, woman’s grin. “There’ll be no rain tonight,” she observes, holding a dark, golden hand against the evening. “This mess’ll be stinking and spreading fever in hours. We’d best move on, ahead of the flies.” She hears the flapping even as he does and they both look back and watch the first gleeful ravens settling on flesh that has melted into one mile-wide mass of bloody meat, limbs and organs scattered at random, to hop upon and peck at half-destroyed faces still screaming for the mercy laughingly denied them as Elric’s patron Duke of Hell, Lord Arioch, gave aid to his favourite son.

These were in the times when Elric left his friend Moonglum in Tanelorn and ranged the whole world to find a land which seemed enough like his own that he might wish to settle there, but no such land as Melniboné could be a tenth its rival in any place the new mortals might dwell. And all these lands were mortal now.

He had begun to learn that he had earned a loss which could never be assuaged and in losing the woman he loved, the nation he had betrayed, and the only kind of honour he had known he had also lost part of his own identity, some sense of his own purpose and reason upon the Earth.

Ironically, it was these very losses, these very dilemmas, which made him so unlike his Melnibonéan folk, for his people were cruel and embraced power for its own sake, which was how they had come to give up any softer virtues they might once have possessed, in their need to control not only their physical world but the supernatural world. They would have ruled the multiverse, had they any clear understanding how this might be achieved; but even a Melnibonéan is not a god. There are some would argue they had not produced so much as a demigod. Their glory in earthly power had brought them to decadent ruin, as it brought down all empires who gloried in gold or conquest or those other ambitions which can never be satisfied but must forever be fed.

Yet even now Melniboné might, in her senility, live, had she not been betrayed by her own exiled emperor.

And no matter how often Elric reminds himself that the Bright Empire was foredoomed to her unhappy end, he knows in his bones that it was his fierce need for vengeance, his deep love for Cymoril (his captive cousin); his own needs, in other words, which had brought down the towers of Imrryr and scattered her folk as hated wanderers upon the surface of the world they had once ruled.

It is part of his burden that Melniboné did not fall to a principle but to blind passion …

As Elric made to bid farewell to his temporary ally, he was attracted to something in the countess's wicked eye, and he bowed in assent as she asked him to ride with her for a while; and then she suggested he might care to take wine with her in her tent.

"I would talk more of philosophy," she said. "I have longed so for the company of an intellectual equal."

And go with her he did, for that night and for many to come. These would be days he remembered as the days of laughter and green hills broken by lines of gentle cypress and poplar, on the estates of Guyë, in the Western Province of Anakhazhan in the lovely years of her hard-won peace.

Yet when they had both rested and both began to look to satisfy their unsleeping intelligences, it became clear that the countess and Lord Elric had very different needs and so Elric said his goodbyes to the countess and their friends at Guyë and took a good, well-furnished riding horse and two sturdy pack animals and rode on towards Elwher and the Unmapped East where he still hoped to find the peace of an untarnished familiarity.

He longed for the towers, sweet lullabies in stone, which stretched like guarding fingers into Imrryr's blazing skies; he missed the sharp wit and laughing ferocity of his kinfolk, the ready understanding and the casual cruelty that to him had seemed so ordinary in the time before he became a man.

No matter that his spirit had rebelled and made him question the Bright Empire's every assumption of its rights to rule over the demibrutes, the human creatures, who had spread so thoroughly across the great land masses of the North and West that were called now "the Young Kingdoms" and dared, even with their puny wizardries and unskilled battlers, to challenge the power of the Sorcerer Emperors, of whom he was the last in direct line.

No matter that he had hated so much of his people's arrogance and unseemly pride, their easy resort to every unjust tyranny to maintain their power.

No matter that he had known shame—a new emotion to one of his kind. Still his blood yearned for home and all the things he had loved or, indeed, hated, for he had this in common with the humans amongst whom he now lived and traveled: he would sometimes rather hold close to what was familiar and encumbering than give it up for something new, though it offered freedom from the chains of heritage which bound him and must eventually destroy him.

And with this longing in him growing with his fresh loneliness, Elric took himself in charge and increased his pace and left Guyë far behind, a fading memory, while he pressed on in the general direction of unknown Elwher, his friend's homeland, which he had never seen.

He had come in sight of a range of hills the local people dignified as

The Teeth of Shenkh, a provincial demon-god, and was following a caravan track down to a collection of shacks surrounded by a mud-and-timber wall that had been described to him as the great city of Toomoo-Kag-Sanapet-of-the-Invincible-Temple, Capital of Iniquity and Unguessed-At Wealth, when he heard a protesting cry at his back and saw a figure tumbling head over heels down the hill towards him while overhead a previously unseen thundercloud sent silver spears of light crashing to the earth, causing Elric's horses to rear and snort in untypical nervousness. Then the world was washed with red-gold light, as if in a sudden dawn, which turned to bruised blue and dark brown before swirling like an angry current towards the horizon and vanishing to leave a few disturbed clouds behind them in a drizzling and depressingly ordinary sky.

Deciding this event was sufficiently strange to merit more than his usually brief attention, Elric turned towards the small, red-headed individual who was picking himself out of a ditch at the edge of the silver-green cornfield, looking nervously up at the sky and drawing a rather threadbare coat about his little body. The coat would not meet at the front, not because it was too tight for him, but because the pockets, inside and out, were crammed with small volumes. On his legs were a matching pair of trews, grey and shiny, a pair of laced black boots which, as he lifted one knee to inspect a rent, revealed stockings as bright as his hair. His face, adorned by an almost diseased-looking beard, was freckled and pale, from which glared blue eyes as sharp and busy as a bird's, above a pointed beak which gave him the appearance of an enormous finch, enormously serious. He drew himself up at Elric's approach and began to stroll casually down the hill. "D'ye think it will rain, sir? I thought I heard a clap of thunder a moment ago. It set me off my balance." He paused, then cast a look backward up the track. "I thought I had a pot of ale in my hand." He scratched his wild head. "Come to think of it, I was sitting on a bench outside The Green Man. Hold hard, sir, ye're an unlikely cove to be abroad on Putney Common." Whereupon he sat down suddenly on a grassy hummock. "Good lord! Am I transported yet again?" He appeared to recognize Elric. "I think we've met, sir, somewhere. Or were you merely a subject?"

"You have the advantage of me, sir," said Elric, dismounting. He felt drawn to this birdlike man. "I am called Elric of Melniboné and I am a wanderer."

"My name is Wheldrake, sir. Ernest Wheldrake. I have been traveling somewhat reluctantly since I left Albion, first to Victoria's England, where I made something of a name, before being drawn on to Elizabeth's. I am growing used to sudden departures. What would your business be, Master Elric, if it is not theatrical?"

Elric, finding half what the man said nonsense, shook his head. "I have practised the trade of mercenary sword for some while. And you, sir?"

"I, sir, am a poet!" Master Wheldrake bristled and felt about his

pockets for a certain volume, failed to find it, made a movement of the fingers as if to say he needed no affidavits, anyway, and settled his scrawny arms across his chest. "I have been a poet of the Court and of the Gutter, it's alleged. I should still be at Court had it not been for Doctor Dee's attempts to show me our Graecian past. Impossible, I have since learned."

"You do not know how you came here?"

"Only the vaguest notion, sir. Aha! But I have placed you." A snap of the long fingers. "A subject, I recall!"

Elric had lost interest in this vein of enquiry. "I am on my way to yonder metropolis, sir, and if you'd ride one of my pack animals, I'd be honoured to take you there. If you have no money, I'll buy you a room and a meal for the night."

"I would be glad of that, sir. Thanks." And the poet hopped nimbly up onto the furthest horse, settling himself amongst the packs and sacks with which Elric had equipped himself for a journey of indeterminate length. "I had feared it would rain and I am prone, these days, to chills …"

Elric continued down the long, winding track towards the churned mud streets and filthy log walls of Toomoo-Kag-Sanapet-of-the-Invincible-Temple while in a high-pitched yet oddly beautiful voice, reminiscent of a trilling bird, Wheldrake uttered some lines which Elric guessed were his own composition. "*With purpose fierce his heart was gripped, and blade gripped tighter, still. And honour struggling within, 'gainst vengeance, cold and cruel. Old Night and a New Age warred in him; all the ancient power, and all the new. Yet he did not stop his slaughtering*. And there is more, sir. He believes that he has conquered himself and his sword. He cries out: 'See, my masters! I force my moral will upon this hellblade and Chaos is no longer served by it! True purpose shall triumph and Justice rule in Harmony with Romance in this most perfect of worlds.' And that, sir, was where my drama ended. Is your own story in any way the same, sir? Perhaps a little?"

"Perhaps a little, sir. I hope you will soon be taken back to whatever demon realm you've escaped from."

"You are offended, sir. In my verse you are a hero! I assure you I had the bones of the tale from a reliable source. A lady. And discretion demands I not reveal her name. Oh, sir! Oh, sir! What a magnificent moment this is for us, when metaphor becomes commonplace reality and the daily round runs into a thing of Fantasy and Myth …"

Scarcely hearing the little man's nonsense, Elric continued towards the town.

"Why, sir, what an extraordinary depression in yonder field," said Wheldrake suddenly, interrupting his own verse. "Do you see it, sir? That shape, as if some huge beast presses the corn? Is such a phenomenon common in these parts, sir?"

Elric glanced casually across the corn and was bound to agree that it had, indeed, been forced down across quite a broad area, and not by any

obvious human agency. He reined in again, frowning. “I’m a stranger here, also. Perhaps some ceremony takes place, which causes the corn to bend so …”

At which there came a sudden snort, which shook the ground under their feet and half-deafened them. It was as if the field itself had discovered a voice.

“Is this odd, to you, sir?” Wheldrake asked, his fingers upon his chin. “It’s damned odd to me.”

Elric found his hand straying towards the hilt of his runesword. There was a stink in the air which he recognized yet could not at that moment place.

Then there came a kind of crack, a roll like distant thunder, a sigh that filled the air and must have been heard by the whole town below, and then Elric knew suddenly how Wheldrake had entered this realm when he had no real business in it, for here was the creature who had actually created the lightning, bringing Wheldrake in its wake. Here was something supernatural broken through the dimensions to confront him.

The horses began to dance and scream. The mare carrying Wheldrake reared and tried to break from her harness, tangling with the reins of her partner and sending Wheldrake once more tumbling to the ground, while out of the unripe corn, like some sentient manifestation of the Earth herself, all tumbling stones and rich soil and clots of poppies and half the contents of the field, growing taller and taller and shaking itself free of what had buried it, rose an enormous reptile, with slender snout, gleaming greens and reds; razor teeth; saliva hissing as it struck the ground; faint smoky breath streaming from its flaring nostrils, while a long, thick scaly tail lashed behind it, uprooting shrubs and further ruining the crop upon which that metropolitan wealth was based. There came another clap like thunder and a leathery wing stretched upwards then descended with a noise only a little more bearable than the accompanying stink; then the other wing rose; then fell. It was as if the dragon were being forced from some great, earthen womb—forced through the dimensions, through walls which were physical as well as supernatural; it struggled and raged to be free. It lifted its strangely beautiful head and it shrieked again and heaved again; and its slender claws, sharper and longer than any sword, clashed and flickered in the fading light.

Wheldrake, scrambling to his feet, began to run unceremoniously towards the town and Elric could do nothing else but let his pack animals run with him. The albino was left confronting a monster in no doubt on whom it wished to exercise its anger. Already its sinuous body moved with a kind of monumental grace as it turned to glare down at Elric. It snapped suddenly and Elric was crashing to the ground, blood pumping hugely from his horse’s torso as the beast’s remains collapsed onto the track. The albino rolled and came up quickly, Stormbringer growling and whispering in his hand, the black runes glowing the length of the blade and the black radiance flickering up and down its edges. And now the dragon hesitated, eyeing him almost

warily as its jaws chewed for a few moments upon the horse's head and the throat made a single swallowing movement. Elric had no other course. He began running towards his massive adversary! The great eyes tried to follow him as he weaved in and out of the corn, and the jaws dripped, shaking their bloody ichor to sear and kill all it touched. But Elric had been raised among dragons and knew their vulnerability as well as their power. He knew, if he could come in close to the beast, there were points at which he might strike and at least wound it. It would be his only chance of survival.

As the monster's head turned, seeking him, the fangs clashing and the great breaths rushing from its throat and nostrils, Elric dashed under the neck and slashed once at the little spot about halfway up its length, where the scales were always soft, at least in Melnibonéan dragons; yet the dragon seemed to sense his stroke and reared back, claws slicing ground and crop like some monstrous scythe, and Elric was flung down by a great clot of earth, half-buried, so that *he* must now struggle to free himself.

It was at that moment some movement of the beast's head, some motion of the light upon its leathery lids, gave him pause and his heart leapt in sudden hope.

A memory teased at his lips but would not manifest itself as anything concrete. He found himself forming the High Speech of old Melniboné, the word for "bondfriend." He was beginning to speak the ancient words of the dragon-calling, the cadences and tunes to which the beasts might, if they chose, respond.

There was a tune in his head, a way of speaking, and then came a single word again, but this was a sound like a breeze through willows, water through stones; a name.

At which the dragon brought her jaws together with a snap and sought the source of the voice. The iron-sharp wattles on the back of her neck and tail began to flatten and the corners of her mouth no longer boiled with poison.

Still deeply cautious, Elric got slowly to his feet and shook the damp earth from his flesh, Stormbringer as eager as always in his hand, and took a pace backward.

"Lady Scarsnout! I am your kin, I am Little Cat. I am your ward and your guider, Scarsnout lady, me!"

The green-gold muzzle, bearing a long-healed scar down the underside of the jaw, gave out an enquiring hiss.

Elric sheathed his grumbling hellblade and made the complicated and subtle gestures of kinship which he had been taught by his father for the day when he should be supreme Dragon Lord of Imrryr, Dragon Emperor of the World.

The dragon-she's brows drew together in something resembling a frown, the massive lids dropped, half-hiding the huge, cold eyes—the eyes of a beast more ancient than any mortal being; more ancient, perhaps, than the gods …

The nostrils, into which Elric could have crawled without much difficulty, quivered and sniffed—a tongue flickered—a great, wet leathery thing, long and slender and forked at the end. Once it almost touched Elric's face, then flickered over his body before the head was drawn back and the eyes stared down in fierce enquiry. For the moment, at least, the monster was calm.

Elric, virtually in a trance by now, as all the old incantations came flooding into his brain, stood swaying before the dragon. Soon her own head swayed, too, following the albino's movements.

And then, all at once, the dragon made a small noise deep in her belly and lowered her head to stretch her neck along the ground, down upon the torn and ruined corn. The eyes followed him as he stepped closer, murmuring the Song of Approach which his father had taught him when he was eleven and first taken to Melniboné's Dragon Caves. Her dragons slept there to this day. A dragon must sleep a hundred years for every day of activity, to regenerate that strange metabolism which could create fiery saliva strong enough to destroy cities.

How this jill-dragon had awakened and how she had come here was a mystery. Sorcery had brought her, without doubt. But had there been any reason for her arrival, or had it been, like Wheldrake's, a mere incidental to some other spell-working?

Elric had no time to debate that question now as he moved in gradual, ritualized steps towards the natural ridge just above the place where the leading part of her wing joined her shoulder. It was where the Dragon Masters of Melniboné had placed their saddles and where, as a youth, he had ridden naked, with only his skill and the good will of the dragon to keep him safe.

It had been many years, and a shattering sequence of events, which had led him to this moment, when all the world was on the change, when he no longer trusted even his memories … The dragon almost called now, almost purred, awaiting his next command, as if a mother tolerated the games of her children.

"Scarsnout, sister, Scarsnout kin, your dragon blood is mixed in ours and ours in yours and we are coupled, we are kind; we are one, the dragon rider and the dragon steed; one ambition, mutual need. Dragon sister, dragon matron, dragon honour, dragon pride …" The Old Speech rolled, trilled and clicked from his tongue; it came without conscious thought; it came without effort, without hesitation, for blood recalled blood and all else was natural. It was natural to climb upon the dragon's back and utter the ancient, joyful songs of command, the complex Dragon Lays of his remote predecessors which combined their highest arts with their most practical needs. Elric was recollecting what was best and noblest in his own people and in himself, and even as he celebrated this he mourned the self-obsessed creatures they had become, using their power merely to preserve their power and that, he supposed, was true decay …

And now the jill's slender neck rises, swaying like a mesmerized cobra, by degrees, and her snout tilts towards the sun, and her long tongue tastes the air and her saliva drips more slowly to devour the ground it touches and a great sigh, like a sigh of contentment, escapes her belly and she moves one hind leg, then the next, swaying and tilting like a storm-tossed ship, with Elric clinging on for his life, his body banged and rolled this way and that, until at last Scarsnout is poised, her claws folding tight as her hind legs rear. Yet still she seems to hesitate. Then she tucks her forelegs into the silk-soft leather of her stomach, and again she tests the air.

Her back legs give a kind of hop. The massive wings crack once, deafeningly. Her tail lashing out to steady her uneven weight, she has risen—she is aloft and mounting—mounting through those miserable clouds into blue perfection, a late afternoon sky, with the clouds below now, like white and gentle hills and valleys where perhaps the harmless dead find peace; and Elric does not care where the dragon flies. He is glad to be flying as he flew as a boy—sharing his joy with his dragon-mate, sharing his senses and his emotions, for this is the true union between Elric's ancestors and their beasts—a union which had always existed and whose origins were explained only in unlikely legends—this was the symbiosis with which, natural and joyful at first, they had learned to defend themselves against would-be conquerors and later, turned conquerors, with which they had overwhelmed all victims. Having become greedy for even more conquests than were offered by the natural world, they sought supernatural conquests also and thus came to make their bond with Chaos, with Duke Arioch himself. And with Chaos to aid them they ruled ten thousand years; their cruelties refined but never abated.

Before then, thinks Elric—before then my people had never thought of war or power. And he knows that it was this respect for all life which must have brought about the original bond between Melnibonéan and dragon. And, as he lies along the natural pommel, the ridge above his jill's neck, he weeps with the wonder of suddenly recollected innocence, of something he believed lost as everything else is lost to him and which makes him believe, if only for this moment, that what he has lost might be, perhaps, restored …

Then he is free! Free in the air! Part of that impossible monster whose wings carry her as if she were a wind-dancing kestrel, light as down, through darkening skies, her skin giving off a sweetness like lavender and her head set in an expression which seems in a way to mirror Elric's own, and she turns and dives, she climbs and wheels while Elric clings without any seeming effort to her back and sings the wild old songs of his ancestors who had come as nomads of the worlds to settle here and had, some said, been welcomed by an even older race whom they superseded and with whom the royal line intermarried.

Up speeds Scarsnout, up she flies, and, when the air grows so thin it can no longer support her and Elric shivers in spite of his clothing and his mouth gasps at the atmosphere, down she goes in a mighty, rushing plummet

until she brings herself up as if to land upon the cloud, then veers slowly away to where the clouds now break to reveal a moonlit tunnel in the surface and down this Scarsnout plunges while behind her lightning flashes once and a thunder clap seems to seal the tunnel as they descend into an unnatural coldness which makes Elric's whole skin writhe and his bones feel as if they must split and crack within him and yet still the albino does not fear, because the dragon does not fear.

Above them now the clouds have vanished. A blue velvet sky is further softened by a large yellow moon, whose light casts their long shadows upon the rushing meadowlands below, while the horizon shows a glint of the midnight sea and is filled with the emerald points of stars, and only as he begins to recognize the landscape below him does Elric know fear.

The dragon has carried him back to the ruins of his dreams, his past, his love, his ambitions, his hope.

She has brought him back to Melniboné.

She has brought him home.

CHAPTER TWO

Of Conflicting Loyalties and Unsummoned Ghosts; Of Bondage and Destiny.

Now Elric forgot his recent joy and remembered only his pain. He wondered wildly if this was mere coincidence or had the jill-dragon been sent to bring him here? Had his surviving kinfolk struck upon a means of capturing him so as to savour the slowness of his tortured passing? Or did the dragons themselves demand his presence?

Soon the familiar hills gave way to the Plain of Imrryr and Elric saw a city ahead—a ragged outline of burned and mutilated buildings. Was this the city of his birth, the Dreaming City he and his raiders had murdered?

As they flew closer Elric began to realize that he did not recognize the buildings. At first he thought they had been transformed by fire and siege, but they were not even, he noticed now, of the same materials. And he laughed at himself. He marveled at his secret longings which had made him believe the dragon had brought him to Melniboné.

But then he knew he recognized the hills and woods, the line of the coast beyond the city. He knew that this was once, at least, where Imrryr stood. As Scarsnout sailed to a gentle landing, hopping once to steady herself, Elric looked across half a mile of familiar grassy ridges and knew that he looked not upon Imrryr the Beautiful, the greatest of all cities, but upon a city his people had called H'hui'shan, the City of the Island, in the High Melnibonéan tongue, and this was the city destroyed in one night in the only civil war Melniboné had ever known, when her lords quarreled over whether to compact themselves with Chaos or remain loyal to the Balance. That war had lasted three days and left Melniboné hidden by oily black smoke for a month. When it had risen it had revealed ruins, but all who sought to attack her when she was weak were more than disappointed, for her pact was made and Arioch aided her, demonstrating the fearful variety of his mighty powers (there had been further suicides in Melniboné as her unhonourable victories rose, while others fled through the dimensions into foreign realms). The cruelest remained to relish an ever-tightening grip upon their world-encompassing empire.

At least, that was one of his people's legends, said to be drawn from the Dead Gods' Book.

Elric understood that Scarsnout had brought him to the remote past. But how had the dragon found the means of traveling so easily between the Spheres? And, again he wondered, why had he been transported here?

Hoping Scarsnout might choose some further action, Elric sat upon the monster's back for a while until it became obvious that the dragon had no intention of moving, so with some reluctance he dismounted, murmured the song of "I-would-appreciate-your-continuing-concern-in-this-matter" and,

there being nothing else for it, began to stride towards the desolate ruins of his people's earliest glories.

"Oh, H'hui'shan, City of the Island, if only I were here a week earlier, to warn thee of thy bond's consequences. But doubtless it would not suit my patron Arioch to let me thwart him so." And he smiled sardonically at this; smiled at his own aching need to make the past produce a finer present: one in which he did not bear such a burden of guilt.

"Perhaps our entire history is of Arioch's writing!" His bargain with the Duke of Hell was a pact of blood and human souls for aid—whatever the runesword did not feast upon belonged to Duke Arioch (though some old tales would have it that sword and patron demon were one and the same). And Elric rarely disguised his distaste for this tradition, which even he lacked the courage to break. It was immaterial to his patron what he thought so long as he continued to honour their bond. And this Elric understood profoundly.

The turf was still crossed by the trails he had known as a boy. He trod them as surely as he had done when, he recollected, his father—distant upon a charger—called to some servitor to take care with the child but to let him walk. He must grow up to remember every pathway that existed in Melniboné; for in those trails and tracks, those roads and highs, lay the configuration of their history, the geometry of their wisdom, the very key to their most secret understandings.

All these pathways, as well as the pathways to the otherworlds, Elric had memorized, together, where necessary, with their accompanying songs and gestures. He was a master-sorcerer, of a line of master-sorcerers, and he was proud of his calling, though disturbed by the uses to which he, as well as others, had put their powers. He could read a thousand meanings in a certain tree and its branches, but he still failed to understand his own torments of conscience, his moral crises, and that was why he wandered the world.

Dark sorceries and spells, images of horrific consequence, filled his head and threatened sometimes, when he dreamed, to seize control of him and plunge him into eternal madness. Dark memories. Dark cruelties. Elric shuddered as he drew close to the ruins, whose towers of wood and brick had collapsed and yet attained a picturesque and almost welcoming aspect, even in the moonlight.

He clambered over the burned rubble of a wall and entered a street which, at ground level, still bore some resemblance to the thing it had been. He sniffed sooty air and felt the ground still warm beneath his feet. Here and there, towards the centre of the city, a few fires still flickered like old rags in a wind and ash covered everything. Elric felt it clinging to his flesh. He felt it clogging his nostrils and drifting through his clothing—the ash of his distant ancestors, whose blackened corpses filled the houses in mimicry of life's activities, threatening to engulf him. But he walked on, fascinated by this glimpse into his past, at the very turning point in his race's destiny. He found himself wandering through rooms still occupied by the husks of their

inhabitants, their pets, their playthings, their tools; through squares where fountains had once splashed, through temples and public buildings where his folk had met to debate and decide the issues of the day, before the emperors had taken all power to themselves and Melniboné had grown to depend upon her slaves, hidden away so that they should not make Imrryr ugly with their presence. He paused in a workshop, some shoe-seller's stall. He grieved for these dead, gone more than ten thousand years since.

The ruins touched something that was tender in him, and he found that he possessed a fresh longing, a longing for a past before Melniboné, out of fear, bargained for that power which conquered the world.

The turrets and gables, the blackened thatch and torn beams, the piles of broken stone and brick, the animal troughs and ordinary domestic implements abandoned outside the houses filled him with a melancholy he found almost sweet and he paused to inspect a cradle or a spinning wheel which showed an aspect of a proud Melnibonéan folk he had never known, but which he felt he understood.

There were tears in his eyes as he roamed those streets, desperately hoping to find just one living soul apart from himself, but he knew the city had stood unpopulated for at least a hundred years after her destruction.

"Oh, that I had destroyed Imrryr so that I might restore H'hui'shan!" He stood in a square of broken statues and fallen masonry looking up at the enormous moon which now rose directly above his head, sending his shadow to mingle with those of the ruins; and he dragged off his helmet and shook out his long, milk-white hair and turned yearning hands towards the city as if to beg forgiveness, and then he sat down upon a dusty slab carved with the delicacy and imagination of genius and over which blood had flowed, then baked, a coarse glaze; and he buried his crimson eyes in the sleeve of his ashy shirt and his shoulders shook and he groaned his complaint at whatever fate had led him to this ordeal …

There came a voice from behind him that seemed to echo from distant catacombs, across aeons of time, as resonant as the Dragon Falls where one of Elric's ancestors had died (in combat, it was said, with himself) and as commanding as the whole of Elric's long and binding royal history. It was a voice he recognized and had hoped, in so many ways, never to hear again.

Once more he wondered if he were mad. The voice was unmistakably that of his dead father, Sadric the Eighty-Sixth, whose company in life he had so rarely shared.

"Ah, Elric, thou weepest I see. Thou art thy mother's son and for that I love her memory, though thou kill'dst the only woman I shall ever truly love and for that I hate thee with an unjust hatred."

"Father?" Elric lowered his arm and turned his bone-white face behind him to where, leaning against a ruined pillar, stood the slender, frail presence of Sadric. Upon his lips was a smile that was terrible in its tranquility.

Elric looked disbelievingly at the face which was exactly as it had been when he had last seen it as his father had lain in funeral state.

"For an unjust hatred there is no release, save the peace of death. And here, as you'll observe, I am denied the peace of death."

"I have dreamed of you, Father, and your disappointment with me. I would that I could have been all you desired in a son …"

"There was never a second, Elric, when you could have been that. The act of thy creation was the sealing of her doom. We had been warned of it in every omen but could do nothing to avert that hideous destiny—" and his eyes glared with a hatred only the unrested dead could know.

"How came you here, Father? I had thought you chosen by Chaos, gone to the service of our patron duke, Lord Arioch."

"Arioch could not claim me because of another pact I had made, with Count Mashabak. He is no longer my patron." And a kind of laugh escaped him.

"Your soul was claimed by Mashabak of Chaos?"

"But disputed by Arioch. My soul is hostage to their rivalries—or was. By some sorcery I still command, I betook myself here, to the very beginning of our true history. And here I have some short sanctuary."

"You are hiding, Father, from the Lords of Chaos?"

"I have gained some time while they dispute, for I have here a spell,

my last great spell, which will free me to join your mother in the Forest of Souls where she awaits me."

"You have a passport to the Forest of Souls? I'd thought such things a myth." Elric wiped chilly sweat from his forehead.

"I sent thy mother there to remain until I joined her. I gave her the means, our Scroll of Dead-Speaking, and she is safe in that sweet eternity, which many souls seek and which few find. I swore an oath that I would do all I could to be reunited with her."

The shade stepped forward, as if entranced, and reached to touch Elric's face with something like affection. But when the hand fell away there was only torment in the old man's undead eyes.

Elric knew a certain sympathy. "Have you no companions here, Father?"

"Only thou, my son. Thee and I now haunt these ruins together."

An unwholesome frisson: "Am I, too, a prisoner here?" said the albino.

"At my humour, aye, my son. Now that I have touched thee we are bound together, whether thou leavest this place or no, for it is the fate of such as I to be linked always to the first living mortal his hand shall fall upon. We are one, now, Elric—or shall be."

And Elric shuddered at the hatred and the relish in his father's otherwise desolate voice.

"Can I not release you, Father? I have been to R'lin K'ren A'a, where our race began in this realm. I sought our past there. I could speak of it …"

"Our past is in our blood. It travels with us. Those degenerates of R'lin K'ren A'a, they were never our true kin. They bred with humans and vanished. It was not they who founded or preserved great Melniboné …"

"There are so many stories, Father. So many conflicting legends …" Elric was eager to continue the conversation with his father. Few such opportunities had existed while Sadric lived.

"The dead know truth from lies. They are privy to that understanding, at least. And I know the truth of it. We did not stem from R'lin K'ren A'a. Such questings and speculations are unnecessary. We are assured of our origins. Thou wouldst be a fool, my son, to question our histories, to dispute their truth. I had thee taught this."

Elric kept his own counsel.

"My magic called the jill-dragon from her cave. The one I had the strength to summon. But she came and I sent her to thee. This is the only sorcery I have left. It is the first significant sorcery of our race and the purest, the dragon-sorcery. But I could not instruct her. I sent her to thee knowing she would recognize thee or she would kill thee. Both actions would have brought us together, eventually, no doubt." The shade permitted itself a crooked smile.

"You cared no more than that, Father?"

"I could *do* no more than that. I long for thy mother. We were meant

to be united for ever. Thou must help me reach her, Elric, and help me swiftly for my own energies and spells weaken—soon Arioch or Mashabak shall claim me. Or destroy me entirely in their struggle!"

"You have no further means of escaping them?" Elric felt his left leg shake uncontrollably for a few seconds before he forced it to obey his will. He realized it had been too long since he had last taken the infusion of herbs and drugs which allowed him the energy of a normal creature.

"In a way. If I remain attached to thee, my son, the object of my unjust hate, then my soul could hide with thine, occupying thy flesh and mine, disguised by blood that is my blood. *They would never sniff me out!*"

Again Elric was seized by a sensation of profound cold, as if death already claimed him; his head was a maelstrom of ungoverned emotions as he sought desperately to take a grip on himself, praying that with the sun's rising his father's ghost would vanish.

"The sun will not rise here, Elric. Not here. Not until the moment of our release or our destruction. That is *why* we are here."

"But does Arioch not object to this? He is my patron, still!" Elric looked for a new madness in his father's face but could find none.

"He is otherwise engaged and could not come to thee now, whether to aid or to punish. His dispute with Count Mashabak absorbs him. That is why thou canst serve me, to perform the task I did not know to perform when alive. Wouldst thou do this thing for me, my son? For a father who always hated thee but did his duty by thee?"

"If I performed this task for you, Father, would I be free of you?"

His father lowered his head in assent.

Elric put a trembling hand upon the pommel of his sword and flung back his head so that the long white hair filled the air like a halo in the moonlight and his uneasy eyes rose to stare into the face of the dead king.

He let out a sigh. In spite of all his horrors, there was some part of him which would be fulfilled if he achieved his father's desire. He wished, however, that he had been permitted the choice. But it was not the Melnibonéan way to permit choice. Even relatives had to be bonded by more than blood.

"Explain my task, Father."

"Thou must find my soul, Elric."

"Your *soul*—?"

"My soul is not with me." The shade itself seemed to make an effort to remain standing. "What animates me now is my will and old sorcery. My soul was hidden so that it might rejoin thy mother, but in avoiding Mashabak's and Arioch's wrath, I lost that which contained it. Find it for me, Elric."

"How shall I recognize it?"

"It resides in a box. No ordinary box, but a box of black rosewood carved all with roses and smelling always of roses. It was your mother's."

"How came you to lose such a valuable box, Father?"

"When Mashabak appeared to claim my soul, then Arioch, I drew up a false soul, which is the spell I taught thee in *Incantations After Death*, to deceive them. This quasi-soul became the object of their feuding for a while and my true soul fled to safety in the box which Diavon Slar, my old body-servant, was to keep safely for me on strictest instructions of secrecy."

"He maintained your secrecy, Father."

"Aye—and fled, believing he had a treasure, believing he could control me through his possession of that box! He fled to Pan Tang with what he understood to be my trapped spirit—some children's tale he had heard—and was disappointed to find no spirit obeyed him at his command. So he planned, instead, to sell his booty to the Theocrat. As it happened, he never reached Pan Tang but was seized by sea-raiders from the Purple Towns. They included the box in their casual booty. My soul was truly lost." And with this came a flicker of a former irony, the faintest of smiles.

"The pirates?"

"Of them, I know only what Diavon Slar told me as I was extracting the vengeance I had warned him I would take. The raiders probably returned to Menii, where they auctioned their booty. My soulbox left our world entirely." Sadric moved suddenly and it was as if an insubstantial shadow shifted in the moonlight. "I can still sense it. I know it traveled between the worlds and went where now only the jill-dragon can follow. That is what has thwarted me. For, until I called thee, I had no means of pursuit. I am bound to this place and now to thee. Thou must fetch back my soulbox, Elric, so that I can rejoin thy mother and rid myself of unjust hate. As thou wilt rid thyself of me."

Trembling with conflicting passions, Elric spoke at last:

"Father, I believe this to be an impossible quest. I cannot but suspect you send me upon it out of hatred alone."

"Hatred, aye, but more besides. *I must rejoin your mother, Elric! I must. I must.*"

Knowing his father's abiding obsession, that convinced Elric of the ghost's veracity.

"Do not fail me, my son."

"And should I succeed? What will happen to us, Father?"

"Bring back my soul and we are both released."

"But if I fail?"

"My soul will leave its prison and enter thee. We shall be united until thy death—I, with my unjust hatred, bonded to the object of my hatred, and thee burdened by all *thou* most hatest in proud Melniboné." He paused, almost to savour this. "That would be my consolation."

"Not mine."

Sadric nodded his corpse's head in silent understanding, and a soft, unlikely laugh escaped his throat. "Indeed!"

"And dost thou have other aid for me in this, Father? Some spell or

charm?"

"Only what thou comest by on the way, my son. Bring back the rosewood box and we both can go our own ways. Fail, and our destinies and souls are linked for ever! Thou wilt never be free of me, thy past, or Melniboné! But thou wilt bring the old glories back, eh?"

Elric's drug-enlivened body began to tremble. The flight and this encounter had exhausted him, and there were no souls here on which his sword could feed.

"I am ailing, Father, and must soon return. The drugs that sustain me were lost with my pack animals."

Sadric shrugged. "As for that, thou hast merely to discover a source of souls on which thy blade might feed. There's killing a-plenty ahead. And a little more that I perceive, but yet it does not come clear …" He frowned. "Go …"

Elric hesitated. Some ordinary impulse wanted him to tell his father that he no longer killed casually to further any whim. Like all Melnibonéans, Sadric had thought nothing of killing the human folk of their empire. To Sadric, the runesword was merely a useful tool, as a stick might be to a cripple. Supernatural schemer though his father was, player of complex games against the gods, he still unquestioningly assumed that one must pledge loyalty to one demon or another in order to survive.

Elric's vision, of universally held power, a place like Tanelorn, owing allegiance neither to Law nor to Chaos but only to itself, was anathema to his father who had made a religion and a philosophy of compromise, as had all his royal race for millennia, so that compromise itself was now raised over all other virtues and become the backbone of their beliefs. Elric wanted, again, to tell his father that there were other ideas, other ways to live, which involved neither excessive violence, nor cruelty, nor sorcery, nor conquest, that he had learned of these ideas not merely from the Young Kingdoms but also from his own folk's histories.

Yet he knew that it would be useless. Sadric was even now devoting all his considerable powers to restoring the past. He knew no other way of life or, indeed, of death.

The albino prince turned away, and it seemed to him at that moment that he had never experienced such grief, even when Cymoril had died on the blade of his runesword, even when Imrryr had blazed and he had known he was doomed to a rootless future, a lonely death.

"I shall seek your rosewood box, Father. But where can I begin?"

"The jill-dragon knows. She'll carry thee to the realm where the box was taken. Beyond that I cannot predict. Prediction grows difficult. All my powers weaken. Mayhap thou must kill to achieve the box. Kill many times." The voice was faint now, dry branches in the wind. "Or worse."

Elric found that he staggered. He was weakening by the moment. "Father, I have no strength."

"*The dragon venom* …" But his father was gone, leaving only a sense of his ghostly passing.

Elric forced himself to move. Now every fallen wall seemed an impossible obstacle. He picked his way slowly through the ruins, back over rubble and broken walls, over the little streams and coarse turf terraces of the hills, forcing himself with a will summoned from habit alone to climb the final hill where, outlined against the huge, sinking moon, Scarsnout awaited him, her wings folded, her long muzzle raised as her tongue tasted the wind.

He remembered his father's last words. They in turn made him recollect an old herbal which had spoken of the distillation of dragon venom; how it brought courage to the weak and skill to the strong, how a man might fight for five days and nights and feel no pain. And he remembered how the herbal had said to collect the venom, so before he clambered back upon the dragon he had reached up his helm and caught in hissing steel a small drop of venom which would cool and harden, he knew, into a pastille, a crumb or two of which might be taken cautiously with considerable liquid.

But now he must endure his pain and fight against his weakness as the dragon bears him up into the unwelcoming blackness which lies above the moon; and a single long, slow stroke of silver gashes the dark and a single sharp clap of thunder breaks the terrible silence of the sky, and the jill-dragon raises her head and beats her monstrous wings and roars a sudden challenge to those unlikely elements …

… While Elric howls the old wild songs of the Dragon Lords, and plunges, in sensuous symbiosis with the great reptile, out of the night and into the blinding glory of a summer afternoon.

CHAPTER THREE

Peculiar Geography of an Unknown Realm; A Meeting of Travelers. On the Meaning of Freedom.

As if aware of her rider's growing weakness, the dragon flew with long, deliberate strokes of her wings and banked with careful grace through the blue pallor of the sky until they flew over trees so close together, and with foliage so dense, that it seemed at first they crossed dark green clouds until the old forest gave way to grassy hills and fields through which a broad river ran, and again the gentle landscape had a familiarity to it, though this time Elric did not dread it.

Soon a sprawling city lay ahead, built on both banks and making the sky hazy with its smoke. Of stone and brick and wood, of slate and thatch and timber shingles, of a thousand blended stinks and noises, it was full of statues and markets and monuments over which the jill-dragon began slowly to circle while below, in panic and curiosity, the citizens ran to look or dashed for cover, depending upon their natures—but then Scarsnout had flapped her wings and taken them with stately authority back into the upper sky, as if she had investigated the place and found it unsuitable.

The summer day went on. More than once did the great dragon-she seem about to land—on scrubland, village, marsh, lake or elm-glade—but always Scarsnout rejected the place and flew on dissatisfied.

Though he had taken the precaution of tying himself by his long silk scarf to the dragon's spine-horn, Elric was losing strength with every moment. Now, moreover, he had no reason to welcome death. To be reunited with his father through eternity was perhaps the worst of all possible hells. It was only when the dragon flew through rainclouds and Elric was able to capture a little water in his helmet, crumbling into it the merest flake of dried venom and drinking the foul-tasting result off in a single draught, that he knew any hope. But when the liquid filled his every vein with fire whose stink made him loathe the flesh that harboured it and want to tear at offending arteries, muscles, skin, he wondered if he had not merely chosen an especially painful way of ensuring his eternal union with Sadric. With each nerve alight, he yearned for any death, any release from the agony.

But even as the pain filled him, the strength grew until soon it was possible to call on that strength and gradually abolish or ignore the pain until it was gone and he felt a cleaner, sweeter energy fill him, somehow purer than that he received from his runesword.

As the jill-dragon flew through evening skies, Elric felt himself grow whole again. A peculiar euphoria filled him. He sang out the ancient dragon-songs, the rich, silky, wicked songs of his folk who, for all their cruelty, had relished every experience that came their way and this relish for life and sensation came naturally to the albino, despite the weakness of his blood.

Indeed, it seemed to him that his blood was somehow touched by a compensatory quality, a world of almost unrelieved sensuality and vividness, so intense that it sometimes threatened to destroy not only him, but those around him. It was one of the reasons he was prepared to accept his loneliness.

Now it did not matter how far the jill-dragon flew. Her venom sustained him. The symbiosis was near-complete. On without rest beat Scarsnout until, beneath a golden late afternoon sun which made the three-quarters ripened wheat glow and shimmer like burnished copper, where a startled figure in a pointed alabaster cap cried out in delight at the sight of them and a cloud of starlings rose suddenly to trace with their hurried flight some familiar hieroglyph in the delicate blue wash of the sky and leave a sudden silence behind them, Scarsnout extended her great ribbed wings in a sinuously elegant glide towards what seemed at first a road made of basalt or some other rock and then became a mile-wide long-healed scar through the wheatlands, too smooth, unpopulated and vast to be a road, yet with an unguessable purpose. It cut through the crops as if it had been laid that day, heaped on both sides by great unkempt banks on which a few weeds and wildflowers grew and over which hopped, flapped and crawled every kind of carrion vermin. As they dropped lower Elric could smell the vile stuff and almost gagged. His nose confirmed what he saw—piles of refuse, bones, human waste, bits of broken furniture and ruined pots—great continuous banks of detritus stretching on either side of the smoothly polished road from horizon to horizon, with no notion of where or from where it led … Elric sang to his jill to take him up and away from all this filth and into the sweet air of the high summer skies, but she ignored him, wheeling first to the north, then to the south, until she was swooping down the very middle of that great, smooth scar, which had something of the brownish-pink of sunned flesh, and she had landed, almost without any sensation, in the centre of it.

Now Scarsnout folded back her wings and settled her clawed feet upon the ground, clearly indicating that she intended to carry Elric no further. With some reluctance he climbed off her back, unraveling the ruined scarf and wrapping it around his waist, as if it would secure him from any dangers hereabouts, and sang the farewell chant of thanking and kinship and, as he called the last lines, the great jill-dragon lifted up her beautiful, reptilian head and joined, with sonorous gravity, in the final cadences. Her voice might have been the voice of Time itself.

Then her jaws snapped shut, her eyes turned once upon him, half-lidded, almost in affection, and, once her tongue had tasted the evening air, she had widened her wings, hopped twice, shaking the surface so that Elric thought it must crack, and was at last a-sky, mounting into the atmosphere again, her graceful body curling and twisting as her wings carried her up to the eastern horizon, the setting sun casting her long, terrible shadow across the fields, and then, near the horizon, a single flash of silver suggested to Elric

that his jill-dragon had returned to her own dimension. He raised his helm in farewell, as grateful for her venom as her patience.

All Elric wished to do was to get free of this unnatural causeway. Though it gleamed like polished marble, he could see now that it was nothing more than beaten mud; earth piled on earth until it had almost the consistency of solid rock. Perhaps the whole thing was built of garbage? For some reason, this thought disturbed him and he began to walk rapidly towards the southern edge. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he wondered again what purpose the place had. Flies now surrounded him and buzzards regarded him as a possible contender for their sweetmeats. He coughed again at the stink but knew he must climb the stuff to get to the wholesome air of the wheatfields.

"Safe passage to your home-cave, sweet Lady Scarsnout," he murmured as he moved. "I owe you both life and death, it seems. But I bear you no ill will."

His scarf wrapped around his nose and mouth, the albino began to climb the yielding filth, disturbing bones and vermin with every movement and making slow progress, while around him birds and winged rats hissed and chittered at him. Again he wondered what kind of creature could have created such a path, if path it were. It could not, he felt sure, be the work of any human agency and this made him all the more anxious to return to the known qualities of the wheatfield.

He had reached the rim and was clambering along it to find a firmer foothold down. Scattering rotted matter and angry rodents as he went, he wondered what kind of culture brought its waste to line a track created by some supernatural being. Then he thought he saw something larger shift below, near where the wheat grew, but the light was bad and he put it down to his imagination. Was the refuse some kind of holy offering? Did this realm's people worship a god who patrolled from one habitation to another in the form of a gigantic snake?

There was another movement below him, as he slid down a few feet and came to rest on an old cistern, and he saw a soft felt hat rise above a pile of rags and an avian face stare up at him in astonished amusement. "Good heavens, sir. This cannot be coincidence! But what purpose has Fate for pairing we two, do you think?" It was Wheldrake, stumbling up from the wheatfield. "What lies behind you, sir, that's duller than this? More corn? Why, sir, this seems a world of corn!"

"Of corn and garbage and a somewhat idiosyncratic pathway of baffling purpose which slices through all, from east to west. It has a sinister air to it."

"So you go the other way, sir?"

"To avoid whichever unpleasant creation of Chaos has chosen to slither this route and take its choice of these offerings. My horses, I suppose, were not carried through the dimensions with you?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. I'd guessed you eaten, by now. But the

reptile was one of those with a sentimental weakness for heroes, I take it?"

"Something of the sort." Elric smiled, grateful in an odd way for the red-headed poet's ironies. They were preferable to his most recent conversation with his father. As he slid down some powdery and decomposing substance alive with maggots, he embraced the little man who almost chirped with pleasure at their reunion. "My dear sir!"

Whereupon, arm in arm they went, back to the bottom and the sweetening wheat, back in the direction of a river Elric had seen from his dragon steed. There had been a town upon that river which, he guessed, might be reached in less than a day. He spoke of this to Wheldrake, adding that they were sadly short of provisions or the means of obtaining any, unless they chewed the unripe wheat.

"I regret my poaching days in Northumberland are long behind me, sir. But as a lad I was apt enough with snare and a gun. It might be, since your scarf is rather badly the worse for wear, that you would not mind if I unraveled it a little more. It's just possible I might remember my old skills."

With an amiable shrug, Elric handed the birdlike poet his scarf and watched as the little fingers worked swiftly, unraveling and reknotting until he had a length of thin cord. "With evening drawing close, sir, I'd best get to work at once."

By now they were some distance from the wall of garbage and could smell only the rich, restful scents of the summer fields. Elric took his ease amongst the wheatstalks while Wheldrake went to work and within a short space of time, having cleared a wide area and dug a pit, they were able to enjoy a young rabbit while they speculated at such a strange world which grew such vast fields and yet seemed to have so few farmsteads or villages. Staring at the rabbit's carcass turning on a spit (also of Wheldrake's devising) Elric said that, for all his sorcerous education, he was not the familiar traveler through the realms that Wheldrake seemed to be.

"Not by choice, sir, I assure you. I blame a certain Doctor Dee, whom I consulted on the Greeks. It was to do with metre, sir. A metric question. I needed, I thought, to *hear* the language of Plato. Well, the story's long and not especially novel to those of us who travel, willy-nilly, through the multiverse, but I spent some while on one particular plane, shifting a little, I must admit, through time (but not the other dimensions) until I had come to rest, I was sure, in Putney."

"Would you return there, Master Wheldrake?"

"Indeed I would, sir. I'm growing a little long in the tooth for extra-dimensional adventuring, and I tend to form firm attachments, so it is rather hard on me, you know, to miss so many friends."

"Well, sir. I hope you will find them again."

"And you, sir. Good luck with whatever it is you hope to discover. Though I suspect you are the kind who's forever searching for the numinous."

"Perhaps," said Elric soberly, chewing upon a tender leg, "but I think

the numinosity of what I presently seek would surprise you greatly …"

Wheldrake was about to ask more when he changed his mind and stared instead, with abiding pride, at his spit and his catch. Elric's own cares were considerably lightened by his relish for the little man's company and quirks of character.

And now Master Wheldrake has found his sought-for volume and has a handy candle to light at the fire so that he might read aloud to the last Prince of Melniboné an account of some demigod of his own dimension and his challenge of a kingship, when there comes a sound of a horse walking slowly through the wheat—a horse which hesitates with every few steps as if controlled by a clever master. So Elric shouts out—

"Greetings, horseman. Would you share our meat?"

There's a pause, then the answering voice is muffled, distant, yet courteous:

"I'd share your heat, sir, for a while. It's mighty cold just now, to me."

The horse continues towards them at the same pace, still pausing from time to time, still cautious, until at last they see its shadow against the firelight and a rider dismounts, walking softly towards them, a silhouette of alarming symmetry, a big man clad from head to foot in armour that flashes silver, gold, sometimes blue-grey. On his helm is a plume of dark yellow and his breastplate is etched with the yellow-and-black Arms of Chaos, the arms of a soulbonded servant of the Lords of Unlikelihood, which are eight arrows radiating from a central hub, representing the variety and multiplicity of Chaos. Behind him his perfect war-stallion was furnished with a hood and surcoat of radiant black-and-silver silk, a high saddle of ornamental ivory and ebony, and silver harness bound with gold.

Elric got to his feet, ready for confrontation but chiefly puzzled by the stranger's appearance. The newcomer wore a helm apparently without a visor, but all of a piece from neck to crown. Only the eye-slits relieved the smoothness of the coruscating steel, which seemed to contain living matter just below its polished surface: matter that flowed and stirred and threatened. Through those slits peered a pair of eyes displaying an angry pain which Elric understood. He was unable to identify a feeling of close affinity with the man as he came up to the fire and stretched gauntleted hands towards the flames. The firelight caught the metal and again suggested that something living was contained in it, trapped in it—some enormous energy, so powerful it could be observed *through* the steel. And yet the fingers stretched and curled like any fleshly finger warmed back to circulation, and the stranger's sigh was one of simple comfort.

"Will you take a little rabbit, sir?" Wheldrake gestured towards the roasting coney.

"Thank you, no, sir."

"Will you unburden yourself of your helm and sit with us? You're in no danger."

"I believe you, sir. But I am unable to remove this helm at present and have not, I'll be frank, fed upon commonplace sustenance for some while."

At this Wheldrake raised a ruddy eyebrow. "Does Chaos send her servants to become cannibals, these days, sir?"

"She's had servants a-plenty who have been that," said the armoured man, turning his back now to the fire's heat, "but I am not of their number. I have not eaten flesh, fruit or vegetable, sir, for nigh on two thousand years. Or it could be more. I ceased attempting such a reckoning long ago. There are realms that are always Night and realms sweltering in perpetual Day and

others where night and day fly by with a speed not of our usual perception."

"Some sort of vow, is it, sir?" says Wheldrake tentatively. "Some holy purpose?"

"A quest, aye, but for something simpler, sir, than you would believe."

"What are you seeking, sir? A particular lost bride?"

"You are perceptive, sir."

"Merely well-read, sir. But that is not all, eh?"

"I seek nothing less than death, sir. It is to that unhappy doom that the Balance did consign me when I betrayed her those numberless millennia since. It is also my doom to fight against those who serve the Balance, though I love the Balance with a ferocity, sir, that has never dissipated. It was ordained—though I have no reason to trust the oracle in question—that I should find peace at the hand of a servant of the Balance—one who was as I once was."

"And what were you once?" enquired Wheldrake, who had followed this last a little more swiftly than the albino.

"I was once a Prince of the Balance, a Servant and Confidant of that Unordinary Intelligence that tolerates, celebrates and loves all life throughout the multiverse and yet which both Law and Chaos would overthrow if they could. Discontented with multiplicity and massive adjustment in the multiverse, guessing something of a great conjunction which must come throughout the Key Planes and set the realities for countless aeons—realities where the Balance might no longer exist, I gave in to experiment. The notion was too strong for me. Curiosity and folly, self-importance and pride led me to convince myself that in doing what I attempted to do, I served the interests of the Balance. And for my failure, or my success, I would have paid an equal price. The price I now pay."

"That is not the whole of your story, sir." Wheldrake was enthralled. "You will not bore me, I know, if you wish to embroider it with more detail."

"I cannot, sir. I speak as I do because that is all I am allowed to unburden of my tale. The rest is for me alone to know until such time I shall be released and then it can be told."

"Released by death, sir? It would create some difficulties regarding the telling, I'd guess."

"The Balance doubtless will decide such things," said the stranger, without much humour.

"Is general death all you look for, sir? Or has death a name?" Elric spoke softly, with some sympathy.

"I am seeking three sisters. They came this way, I think, a few days since. Would you have seen three sisters? Riding together?"

"I regret, sir, that we are but recently transported to this realm, through no desire of our own, and thus are newly here without maps or directions." Elric shrugged. "I had hoped you would know a little of the place."

"It is in what they call the Nine Millionth Ring, the maguses here. It

exists within what they have formalized as the Realms of Central Significance, and it is true there is an unusual quality to the plane which I have yet to identify. It is not a true Centre, for that is the Realm of the Balance, but it is what I would call a quasi-centre. You'll forgive the jargon, sir, I hope, of the philosopher. I was for some generations an alchemist in Prague."

"Prague!" cries Wheldrake with a caw of delighted recognition. "Those bells and towers, sir. And do you know Mirenburg, perhaps? Even more beautiful!"

"The memories are no doubt pleasant enough," says the armoured man, "since I do not recall them. I would take it that you, too, are upon a quest here?"

"Not I, sir," says Wheldrake, "unless it be for Putney Common and my lost half-pint."

"I am seeking something, aye," agreed Elric cautiously. He had hoped to learn a little of the geography rather than the mystical and astrological placing of this world. "I am Elric of Melniboné."

His name does not seem of any great significance to the armoured man. "And I am Gaynor, once a Prince of the Universal, now called the Damned. Perhaps we have met? Without these names or even faces? In some other incarnation?"

"It is not my misfortune to recall any other lives," says Elric softly, at last disturbed by Gaynor's enquiries. "I understand you only a little, sir. I am a mercenary soldier en route to a new location with a view to finding myself a fresh patron. To the supernatural, I am almost a stranger."

And he was grateful that Wheldrake's eyebrows were rising at that moment from behind Gaynor. Why he should decide upon such subterfuge he did not understand, only that, for all his being drawn to Gaynor, for all their mutual patronage under Chaos, he feared something in him. Gaynor had no reason to wish him harm and Elric guessed that Gaynor did not waste anything of himself in meaningless challenges or killings, yet still Elric grew more close-lipped, as if he, too, were fated by the Balance never to speak of his own story, and at length they settled down to sleep, three strange figures in what appeared to be an infinity of wheat.

Early the next morning, Gaynor resumed his saddle. "I was glad of the company, gentlemen. If you travel yonder, you'll find a pretty settlement. The people there are traders and welcome strangers. They treat us, indeed, with unusual respect. I go on my way. I have been informed that my sisters journeyed towards a place called the Gypsy Nation. Know you anything of that?"

"I regret, sir," said Wheldrake, wiping his hands upon an enormous red cotton handkerchief, "we are virgins in this world. Innocent as babes. We are wholly at a disadvantage, having but recently arrived in this realm and having no notion of its people or its gods. Perhaps, if I might be somewhat

forward, I would suggest that you are yourself of divine or semi-divine origin?"

The answering laugh seemed to find an internal echo, as if the prince's helm disguised the entrance to some infinite chasm. It was far away, yet oddly intimate. "I told you, Master Wheldrake. I was a Prince of the Balance. But not now. Now, I assure you, sir, there is nothing divine about Gaynor the Damned."

Murmuring that he still did not understand the significance of the prince's title, Wheldrake subsided. "If we could help, sir, we would—"

"Who are these women you seek?" Elric asked.

"Three sisters, similar in looks and upon a quest or errand of some singular urgency to themselves. They are searching, I gather, for a lost countryman or perhaps even a brother and had asked hereabouts for the Gypsy Nation. When the people heard they sought the Nation they put them on their way but refused all further intercourse. My only advice to you would be to avoid the subject completely, unless it is raised by them! I have a suspicion, moreover, that once you encounter this band of nomads, you have precious little chance of leaving their ranks unscathed."

"I am grateful for your advice, Prince Gaynor," said Elric. "And did you learn who grows so much wheat, and why?"

"Fixed tenants they are called, and when I asked the same question I was told with a somewhat humourless laugh that it was to feed the locusts. I have heard of stranger practices. There is some tension with the gypsies, I gather. They will not speak much of any of this but become unsettled. The realm's called by them Salish-Kwoonn, which, you'll recall, is the name of the city in the Ivory Book. An odd irony, that. I was amused." And he turned his horse away from them as if he escaped wholly into the abstract, his natural environment, and rode slowly towards that distant depression, those hills of refuse, whose presence was already marked on the horizon by crows and kites, by masses of flies swarming like black smoke.

"A scholar," said Wheldrake, "if a little on the cryptic side. You understand him better than do I, Prince Elric. But I wish he had traveled our way. What do you make of the fellow?"

Elric paused, choosing his words, fiddling with the buckle of his belt. Then he said: "I am afraid of him. I fear him as I have never feared a human creature, mortal or immortal. His doom is terrible, indeed, for he has known the Sanctuary of the Balance, and that is what I yearn for. To have had it—and lost it …"

"Come, now, sir. You must exaggerate. Odd, he was, to be sure. But affable, I thought. Given his circumstances."

Elric shuddered, glad to see Prince Gaynor gone. "Yet I fear him as I fear nothing else."

"As you fear yourself, maybe, sir?" And then Wheldrake looked with regret upon the face of his new friend. "I beg you, sir, I did not wish to seem

forward."

"You are too intelligent for me, Master Wheldrake. Your poet's eye is perhaps sharper than I would like."

"Random instinct, sir, I assure you. I understand nothing and say everything. That's *my* doom, sir! Not as grand as some, no doubt, but it gets me in and out of trouble in roughly equal proportions."

And with that Master Wheldrake assures himself of a dead fire, breaks down his spit and buries it with regret, keeps hold of his snare, which he tucks in his pocket with a volume which has lost its binding to reveal some vulgar marbling, throws his frock-coat over his shoulder and plunges through the wheat in Elric's wake. "Did I recite my verse epic, sir, concerning the love and death of Sir Tancred and Lady Mary? In the form of the Northumberland ballad, which was the first poetry I ever heard. The family estates were remote, but I was not lonely there."

His voice chirruping and trilling the cadences of a primitive dirge, the red-combed scrivener skipped and scampered to keep up with the tall albino.

Four hours later, they reached the broad, slow-flowing river and could see, rising on picturesque cliffs above the water, the town Elric sought. Meanwhile Wheldrake declaimed the ballad's last resounding couplets and seemed as relieved as Elric that his composition was concluded.

The town appeared to have been carved by fanciful master masons from the glinting limestone of the cliffs and was reached by a fairly narrow track, evidently of artificial construction in places, which wound above the rocks and white water some distance below, rising gradually before it blended with the town's chief street to wind again between tall, many-storeyed dwellings and warehouses, fanciful public buildings and statuary, topiary and elaborate flower-gardens to become lost among a maze of other thoroughfares and alleys which lay below an ancient castle, itself covered in vines and flowering creepers, dominating both the town and the thirteen-arched bridge which spanned the river at its narrowest point and crossed to a smaller settlement beyond where, evidently, the wealthy citizens had built their pale villas.

The town had an air of contented prosperity and Elric became optimistic as he saw it lacked any real walls and clearly had not needed to defend itself against aggressors for many years. Now a few local people, in bright, much-embroidered clothing, very different in style from Elric's or, indeed, Wheldrake's, greeted them cheerfully and openly, like men and women who know considerable security and are used to strangers.

"If they welcomed Gaynor, Prince Elric," said Wheldrake, "then I would guess we would not seem especially alien to them! This place has a Frenchified air to it, reminding me of certain settlements along the Loire, though it lacks the characteristic cathedral. Is there any clue, do you perceive, to their form of religion?"

"Perhaps they have none," said Elric. "I have heard of such races." But

clearly Wheldrake disbelieved him.

"Even the French have religion!"

The road took them past the first houses, perched on rocks and terraces above them and all displaying the richest flower-gardens Elric remembered. A scent came off them, mingling with the faint smells of paint and cooking, and both travelers found themselves relaxing, smiling at those who hailed them, until Elric stopped for a moment and enquired of a young woman in a white and red smock the name of the town.

"Why, this is Agnesh-Val, sir. And across the river is Agnesh-Nal. How came you here, gentlemen? Was your boat wrecked at the Forli rapid? You should go to the Distressed Travelers House in Fivegroat Lane, just below Salt Pie Alley. They'll feed you there, at least. Do you carry the medal of the Insurer's Guild?"

"I regret not, madam."

"Sadly, then, you will be entitled only to our hospitality."

"Which would seem more than generous, lady," said Wheldrake, offering her a rather inappropriate wink before skipping to catch up with his friend.

Eventually, through the twists and turns of the old, cobbled streets, they reached the Distressed Travelers House, a gabled building of considerable antiquity which leaned at all angles, as if too drunk to stand without the support of the houses on either side of it, and whose beams and walls bulged and warped in ways Elric would have thought impossible for natural matter not touched by Chaos.

Within the doorway of this establishment, seeming entirely of a piece with it, both in terms of posture and of age, leaned and sprawled, his limbs at every angle, his head this way, his hat that, a tooth jutting one direction, his pipe another, a creature of such profound thinness and gauntness and melancholy that Elric was moved, obscurely, to apologize and enquire if he had come to the right place.

"It's the place that you face, sir, by Our Watcher's Grace, my lord. Come for charity, have you? For charity and some smart advice?"

"Hospitality, sir, is what we were offered!" There was an edge to Wheldrake's outraged chirrup. "Not, sir, charity!" He resembled an angered grouse, his face almost as red as his hair.

"I care not what fancy words dress the action, my good lords," and the creature rose, folding and collapsing and extending itself in such a way as to bring itself upright, "I call it *charity*!" Tiny diamond-lights glittered from cavernous sockets and ill-fitting teeth clacked in flaccid lips. "I care not what dangers you have faced, what calamities have befallen you, what hideous losses you have sustained, what rich men you were, what poor men you have become. Had you not considered these risks, you would not have come this far and ventured across the Divide! Thus you have yourselves alone to blame for your misfortunes."

"We were told we might find food at this house," said Elric evenly. "Not ill-tempered crowfrighters and discourtesy."

"Hypocrites that they are, they lied. The House is closed for redecoration. It is being converted to a restaurant. With luck, it should soon turn a profit."

"Well, sir, we have put such narrow notions of accountability behind us in my world," said Wheldrake. "However, I apologize for disturbing you. We have been misinformed, as you say."

Elric, unused to such behaviour and still a Melnibonéan noble, found that he had gripped his sword-hilt without his realizing it. "Old man," he said, "I am discommoded by your insolence …" Then Wheldrake's warning hand fell upon the albino's arm and he collected himself.

"The old man lies! He lies! He lies!" From behind them, up the hill, a large key ready in his hand, bustled a stocky fellow of fifty or so, his grey hair bristling from beneath a velvet cap, his beard half-tangled, his robes and suitings all awry, as if he had dressed in a hurry from some half-remembered bed. "He lies, good sirs. He lies. (Be off with you, Reth'chat, to plague some other institution!) The man is a relic, gentlemen, from an age most of us have only read about. He would have us judged by our wealth and our martial glory rather than our good will and tranquility of spirit. Good morrow, good morrow. You've come to dine, I hope."

"Cold and tasteless is the bread of charity," grumbled the Relic, scuttling down the street towards a group of playing children and failing to scatter them with his stick-insect arms. "Accountability and self-sufficiency! They will destroy the family. We shall all perish. We shall serve at the marching boards, mark my words!"

And with that he turned the corner into Old Museum Gate and disappeared with a final display of miraculous angularity into an arcade of shops.

The genial middle-aged man waved his key before inserting it in the ancient door. "He is an advertizement for himself only. You'll find such blowhards in every town. I take it that our gypsy friends exacted a 'tax' from you. What would you have been bringing us?"

"Gold, mostly," said Elric, understanding at last the manners and ready lies of a mercenary and a thief, "and precious jewels."

"You were brave to make the attempt. Did they find you this side of the Divide?"

"It would seem so."

"And stripped you of everything. You are lucky to have your clothing and weapons. And 'tis as well they did not catch you crossing the Divide."

"We waited a season before we were sure of our chance." This from Wheldrake, entering the spirit of it, as if in a childish game, a knowing grin upon his broad lips.

"Aye. Others have waited longer." The door opened silently and they

entered a passage lit by glowing yellow lamps, its walls as twisted inside as they were without; its staircases rising in unlikely places and going where none could guess, its passages and chambers appearing suddenly and always of peculiar shapes and angles, sometimes brilliant with candles, sometimes gloomy and musty, as their host led them on, deeper and deeper into the house until they came at last to a large, cheerful hall in the centre of which was a great oaken table, lined with benches—enough space for two score of hungry travelers. There was, however, only one other guest, already helping herself to the rich stew steaming in a pot over the hearth. She was dressed in simple clothes of russet and green, a slender sword on her hip, a dagger to balance it, a muscular, full-hipped figure, broad shoulders and a face of brooding beauty beneath a mass of red-gold hair. She nodded to them as she swung her legs back over the bench and began to eat, clearly showing she did not wish to talk.

Their host dropped his voice. "I understand your fellow traveler to have experienced exceptional inconvenience to her person and her ambitions just recently. She has expressed some wish not to engage in conversation today. You will find all you need here, gentlemen. There is a servant about somewhere who will see to any particular needs, and I will return in a couple of hours to see what other aid we can supply. We do not discourage failed venturers in Agnesh-Val or we should never trade! It is our policy to help the failed ones just as we profit from the successful ones. This appears both fair and sane to us."

"And so it is, sir," said Wheldrake with approval. "You are of the Liberal persuasion, evidently. One hears so much Toryism as one travels throughout the rea—that is, the world."

"We believe in enlightened self-interest, sir, as I think do all civilized peoples. It is in the interest of the community and that larger community beyond to ensure that all are courteously and properly enabled to make what they wish of themselves. Will you eat, sir? Will you eat?"

Elric was aware of the woman's moody eyes regarding them as they spoke together and remarked to himself that he had not seen a face more lovely and more determined since Cymoril had lived. Her wide blue eyes were steady and unselfconscious as she chewed slowly, her thoughts unreadable. And then, suddenly, she smiled once before she gave her full attention to her food, leaving Elric with more of a mystery than before.

Having helped their deep plates to the stew, which gave off a delicious smell, they found themselves places at the table and ate for a while in silence until at last the woman spoke. There was unexpected warm humour in her voice and a certain heartiness which Elric found attractive. "What lie brought you this free meal, boys?"

"A misunderstanding, lady, rather than a lie," said Wheldrake diplomatically, licking his spoon and wondering whether to take a second trip to the cauldron.

"You are no more traders than am I," she said.

"That was the chief misunderstanding. Apparently they can imagine no other kind of traveler here."

"Apparently so. And you are recently here in this realm. By the river, no doubt."

"I do not understand the means," said Elric, still cautious.

"But you both seek the three sisters, of course."

"It seems that everyone does that," Elric told her, letting her believe whatever she wished. "I am Elric of Melniboné and this is my friend Master Wheldrake, the poet."

"Of Master Wheldrake I have heard." There was perhaps some admiration in the lady's voice. "But you, sir, I fear are unknown to me. I am called the Rose and my sword is called Swift Thorn while my dagger is called Little Thorn." She spoke with pride and defiance and it was clear that she uttered some kind of warning, though what she feared from them Elric could not guess. "I travel the time streams in search of my revenge." And she smiled down at her empty bowl, as if in self-mocking embarrassment at a shameful admission.

"And what do the three sisters mean to you, madam?" asked Wheldrake, his little voice now a charming trill.

"They mean everything. They have the means of leading me to the resolution of all I have lived for, since I swore my oath. They offer me the chance of satisfaction, Master Wheldrake. You are, are you not, that same Wheldrake who wrote *The Orientalist's Dream*?"

"Well, madam—" in some dismay—"I was but newly arrived in a new age. I needed to begin my reputation afresh. And the Orient was all the rage just then. However, as a mature work—"

"It is exceptionally sentimental, Master Wheldrake. But it helped me through a bad hour or two. And I still enjoy it for what it is. After that comes *The Song of Iananthe*, which is of course your finest."

"But Heavens, madam, I have not yet written the work! It is sketched, that's all, in Putney."

"It is excellent, sir. I'll say no more of it."

"I'm obliged for that, madam. And—" he recovered himself—"also for your praise. I, too, have some affection for my Oriental period. Did you read, perhaps, the novel which was just lately published—*Manfred; Or, the*

Gentleman Hoorii?"

"Not part of your canon when I last was settled anywhere, sir."

And while the pair of them talked of poetry, Elric found himself leaning his head upon his arms and dozing until suddenly he heard Wheldrake say:

"And how do these gypsies go about unpunished? Is there no authority to keep them in check?"

"I know only that they are a nation of travelers," said the Rose quietly, "perhaps a large nomad horde of some description. They call themselves the Free Travelers or the People of the Road and there is no doubt that they are powerful enough for the local folk to fear. I have some suggestion that the sisters rode to join the Gypsy Nation. So I would join it, too."

And Elric remembered the wide causeway of beaten mud and wondered if that had any connection with the Gypsy Nation. Yet they would not league themselves, surely, with the supernatural? He became increasingly curious.

"We are all three at a disadvantage," said the Rose, "since we allowed our hosts to assume we were victims of the gypsies. This means we cannot pursue any direct enquiries but must understand elliptically what we can. Unless we were to admit our deception."

"I have a feeling this would make us somewhat more unpopular. These people are proud of their treatment of traders. But of non-traders, we have not learned. Perhaps their fate is less pleasant." Elric sighed. "It matters not to me. But if you would have company, lady, we'll join forces to seek these sisters."

"Aye, for the moment I see no harm in such an alliance." She spoke sagely. "Have you heard anything of them?"

"As much as have you," said Elric, truthfully. Within him now a voice was speaking. He tried to quiet it but it would not be silent. It was his father's voice. *The sisters. Find them. They have the box. They have the box*. The voice was fading now. Was it false? Was he deceived? He had no other course to follow, he decided, so he might as well follow this one and hope, ultimately, it might lead him to the rosewood box and his father's stolen soul. Besides, there was something he enjoyed in this woman's company that he felt he might never find again, an easy, measured understanding which made him, in spite of his careful resolve, wish to tell her all the secrets of his life, all the hopes and fears and aspirations he had known, all the losses; not to burden her, but to offer her something she might wish to share. For they had other qualities in common, he could tell.

He felt, in short, that he had found a sister. And he knew that she, too, felt something of the same kinship, though he were Melnibonéan and she were not. And he wondered at all of this, for he had experienced kinship of a thoroughly different kind with Gaynor—yet kinship, nonetheless.

When the Rose had retired, saying she had not slept for some thirty-six hours, Wheldrake was full of enthusiasm for her. "She's as womanly a

woman, sir, as I've ever seen. What a magnificent woman. A Juno in the flesh! A Diana!"

"I know nothing of your local divinities," said Elric gently, but he agreed with Wheldrake that they had met an exceptional individual that day. He had begun to speculate on this peculiar linking of fathers and sons, quasi-brothers and quasi-sisters. He wondered if he did not sense the presence of the Balance in this—or perhaps, more likely, the influence of the Lords of Chaos or of Law, for it had become obvious of late that the Dukes of Entropy and the Princes of Constancy were about to engage in a conflict of more than ordinary ferocity. Which went further to explaining the urgency that was in the air—the urgency his father had attempted to express, though dead and without his soul. Was there, in this slow-woven pattern that seemed to form about him, some reflection of a greater, cosmic configuration? And, for a second, he had a glimmering of the vastness of the multiverse, its complexity and variousness, its realities and its still-to-be-realized dreams; possibilities without end—wonders and horrors, beauty and ugliness—limitless and indefinable, full of the ultimate in everything.

And when the grey-haired man came back, a little better dressed, a little neater in his toilet, Elric asked him why they did not fear direct attack from the so-called Gypsy Nation.

"Oh, they have their own rules about such things, I understand. There is a status quo, you know. Not that it makes your circumstances any more fortunate …"

"You parley with them?"

"In a sense, sir. We have treaties and so forth. It is not Agnesh-Val we fear for, but those who would come to trade with us …" And again he made apologetic pantomime. "The gypsies have their ways, you know. Strange to us, and I would not serve them directly, I think, but we must see the positive as well as the negative side of their power."

"And they have their freedom, I suppose," said Wheldrake. "It is the great theme of *The Romany Rye.*"

"Perhaps, sir." But their host seemed a trifle doubtful. "I am not aware of what you speak—a play?"

"An account, sir, of the joys of the open road."

"Ah, then it would be of gypsy origin. We do not buy their books, I fear. Now, gentlemen, I do not know if you would take advantage of what we offer distressed travelers by way of credit and cost-price equipment. If you have no money, we will take kind. Perhaps to be sure one of *those* books, if you like, Master Wheldrake, for a horse."

"A book for a horse, sir! Well, sir!"

"Two horses? I regret I have no notion of the market value. Book-reading is not a great habit among us. Perhaps we should feel ashamed, but we prefer the passive pleasures of the evening arena."

"As well as the horses, perhaps a few days' provisions?" suggested

Elric.

"If that seems fair to you, sir."

"My books," pronounced Wheldrake through gritted teeth, his nose seeming more pointed than ever, "are my—my *self*, sir. They are my identity. I am their protector. Besides, though through the oddity of some telepathy we all enjoy, we can *understand* language, we cannot *read* it. Did you know that, sir? The ability does not extend to that. Logical, in one sense, I suppose. No, sir, I will not part with a page!"

But when Elric had pointed out that Wheldrake had already explained that one of the volumes was in a language even he did not know and suggested that their lives might depend upon acquiring horses and throwing in with the Rose, who already had her horse, Wheldrake at last consented to part with the *Omar Khayyam* he had hoped one day to read.

So Elric, Wheldrake and the Rose all three rode back down the white road beside the river, back to where they had joined the trail on the previous day, but now they remained on the path, letting it carry them slowly and sinuously southward, following the lazy flow of the river. And Wheldrake sang his *Song of 'Rabia* to an entranced Rose, while Elric rode some distance ahead, wondering if he had entered a dream and fearing he would never find his father's soul.

They had reached a part of the river road Elric did not remember passing over and he was remarking to himself that this had been close to where the dragon had headed due south, away from the water's winding course, when his sensitive ears caught a distant noise he could not identify. He mentioned it to the others but neither could hear it. Only after another half-hour had passed did the Rose cup her hand to her ear and frown. "A kind of rushing. A sort of roar."

"I hear it now," said Wheldrake, rather obviously piqued that he, the poet, should be the least well-tuned. "I did not know you meant that rushing, roaring kind of noise. I had understood it to be a feature of the water." And then he had the grace to blush, shrug and take an interest in something at the end of his beaklike nose.

It was another two hours before they saw that the water was now gushing and leaping with enormous force, through rocks which even the most skilled navigator could not have negotiated, and sending up such a whistling and shouting and yelling it might have been a live thing, voicing its furious discontent. The roadway was slippery with spray and they could scarcely make themselves heard above the noise, could scarcely see more than a few paces in front of them, could smell only the angry water. And then the road had dropped away from the river and entered a hollow which made the noise suddenly distant.

The rocks around them still ran with water sprayed from above, but the near-silence was almost physically welcome to them and they breathed deep sighs of pleasure. Then Wheldrake rode a little ahead and came back to

report that the road curved off, along what appeared to be a cliff. Perhaps they had reached the ocean.

They had left the hollow and were on the open road again where coarse grass stretched to an horizon which still roared, still sent up clouds of spray, like a silver wall. Now the road led them to the edge of a cliff and a chasm so deep the bottom was lost in blackness. It was into this abyss that water poured with such relentless celebration and when Elric looked up he gasped. Only at that moment had he seen the causeway overhead—a causeway that curved from the eastern cliff of a great bay to the western cliff —the same causeway, he was sure, that he had seen earlier. Yet this could not be made of beaten mud. The mighty curving span was woven of boughs and bones and strands of metal supporting a surface that seemed to be made of thousands of animal hides fixed one on top of another by layers of foul-smelling bone-glue—utterly primitive in one way, thought Elric, but otherwise a sturdy and sophisticated piece of engineering. His own people had once possessed similar ingenuity, before magic began to absorb them. He was admiring the extraordinary structure as they rode beside it, when Wheldrake spoke up.

"It's no wonder, friend Elric, nobody chooses to consider the river route below what is, I'm sure, the thing they call the Divide."

And Elric was forced to smile at this irony. "Does that strange causeway lead, do you think, to the Gypsy Nation?"

"*Leads to death, disorder and dismay; leads to the craven Earl of Cray,*" intoned Wheldrake, the association sparking, as it did so often, snatches of self-quotation. "*Now Ulric takes the Urgent Brand and hand in hand they trembling stand, to bring the justice of the day, the terrible justice of the day, to evil Gwandyth, Earl of Cray.*"

Even the admiring Rose did not applaud, nor think his verse appropriate to this somewhat astonishing moment, with the roaring river to one side, the cliffs and the chasm to another; above that a great causeway of primitive construction stretching for more than a mile from cliff to cliff, high over the water's spray—and some distance off the wide waters of a lake, blue-green and dreamy in the sun. Elric yearned for the peace it offered. Yet he guessed the peace might also be illusory.

"Look, gentlemen," says the Rose, letting her horse break into a bit of a canter, "there's a settlement ahead. Can it be an inn, by any happy chance?"

"It would seem an appropriate place for one, madam. They have a similar establishment at Land's End, in my last situation …" says Wheldrake, cheering.

The sky was overclouded now, dark and brooding, and the sun shone only upon the far-off lake, while from the chasm beside them came unpleasant booming noises, sounds like wailing human voices, savage and greedy. And all three joked nervously about this change in the landscape's mood and said how much they missed the easy boredom of the river and the wheat and would

gladly return to it.

The unpainted, ramshackle collection of buildings—a two-storey house with crooked gables surrounded by about a dozen half-ruined outhouses—did, indeed, sport a sign—a crow's carcass nailed to a board. Presumably the indecipherable lettering gave a name to the place.

" 'The Putrefied Crow' is good enough for me," says Wheldrake, seemingly in more need of this hostelry than the other two. "A place for pirate meetings and sinister executions. What think you?"

"I'm bound to agree." The Rose nods her pale red curls. "I would not choose to visit it, if there were any choice at all, but you'll note there's none. Let's see, at least, what information we can gain."

In the shadow of that causeway, on the edge of that abyss, the three unlikely companions gave their horses somewhat reluctantly up to an ostler of dirty, though genial, appearance, and stepped inside "the Putrefied Crow," to look with surprise upon the six burly men and women who were already enjoying such hospitality as the place offered.

"Greetings to you, gentlemen. My lady." One of them doffed a hat so trimmed in feathers, ribbons, jewels and other finery its outline was completely lost. All these folk were festooned in lace, velvet, satin, in the most vivid array, with caps and hats and helmets of every fanciful style, their dark curls oiled to mingle with the blue-black beards of the men or fall upon the olive shoulders of the women. All were armed to the teeth and clearly ready to address any argument with steel. "Have you traveled far?"

"Far enough for a day," said Elric, stripping off his gloves and cloak and taking them up to the fire. "And you, my friends. Do you come far?"

"Why," says one of the women, "we are the Companions of the Endless Way. We are travelers, always. Pledged to it. We follow the road. We are the free auxiliaries of the Gypsy Nation. Pure-bred Romans of the Southern Desert, with ancestors who traveled the world before there were nations of any sort!"

"Then I'm delighted to meet you, madam!" Wheldrake shook his hat into the fire, causing it to hiss and spit. "For it's the Gypsy Nation we seek."

"The Gypsy Nation requires no seeking," said the tallest man, in red and white velvet. "The gypsies will always come to you. All you must do is wait. Put a sign upon your door and wait. The season is near-ended. Soon begin the seasons of our passing. Then you shall see the crossing of the Treaty Bridge, by which we keep to our old trail, though the land has long since fallen away."

"The bridge is yours? And the road?" Wheldrake was puzzled. "Can gypsies own such things and still be gypsies?"

"I smell walkerspew!" One of the women rose, a threatening fist upon her dagger's hilt. "I smell the droppings of a professor-bird. There's nonsense in the air and the place for nonsense isn't here."

It was Elric who broke that specific tension, by moving easily between

the two. “We are come to parley and perhaps to trade,” he said, for he could think of no other excuse they might accept.

“Trade?” This caused a general grinning and muttering amongst the gypsies. “Well, gentlemen, everyone’s welcome in the Gypsy Nation. Everyone who has the taste for wandering.”

“You’ll take us there?”

Again they seemed to find this amusing and Elric guessed few residents of this plane volunteered to travel with the gypsies.

It was clear to Elric that the Rose was deeply suspicious of this cutthroat half-dozen and not at all sure she wished to go with them, yet again she was determined to find the three sisters and would risk any danger to follow them.

“There are friends of ours gone ahead,” said Wheldrake, ever the quickest wit in such situations. “Three young ladies, all very alike? Would you have made their acquaintance?”

“We are Romans of the Southern Desert and do not as a rule make small-talk with the *diddicoyim.*”

“Ha!” exclaims Wheldrake. “Gypsy snobs! The multiverse reveals nothing but repetitions! And we continue to be surprised by them …”

“This is no time for social observation, Master Wheldrake,” says the Rose severely.

“Madam, it is always time for that. Or what are we else, but beasts?” He’s offended. He winks at the tall gypsy and raises his tiny voice in song. “*I’d rather go with the Gypsy Wild; And bear a Gypsy’s nut-brown child!*” He hums the air. “Are you familiar with the ballad, good friends?”

And he charms them enough to make them ease their bodies more comfortably upon their benches and tell patronizing jokes about a variety of non-gypsy peoples, including, of course, Wheldrake’s own, while Elric’s strange appearance soon gets him nicknamed “the Ermine,” which he accepts with the equanimity with which he accepts all other names presented by those who find him unnatural and disturbing. He bides his time with a patience that has become almost physical, as if it is a shell he can strap around himself, to make himself wait. He knows he has but to draw Stormbringer for a minute and six gypsies would lie, drained of life and soul, upon the stained boards of the inn; but also, perhaps that the Rose would die, or Wheldrake, for Stormbringer is not always satisfied merely with the lives of enemies. And because he is an adept, and no other person here, at the roaring edge of the world, has any inkling of his power, he smiles a little to himself. And if the gypsies take it for a placatory grin and tell him he’s thin enough to wipe out a whole warren-full of rabbits, then he cares not. He is Elric of Melniboné, prince of ruins, last of his line, and he seeks the receptacle of his dead father’s soul. He is a Melnibonéan and he draws upon this atavistic pride for all the strength it can give him, remembering the almost sensuous joy that came with the assumption of his superiority over all other creatures, natural and

supernatural, and it armours him, though it brings back, too sharply, the pain in memory.

Meanwhile Wheldrake is teaching four of the gypsies a song with a noisy and vulgar chorus. The Rose engages the landlord in a discussion of the menu. He offers them rabbit couscous. It is all he has. She accepts it on their behalf, they eat as much of the food as they can bear, then retire to a mephitic loft where they sleep as best they can while a variety of bugs and small vermin search across their bodies for some worthwhile morsel, and find little. Elric's blood is never lusted after by insects.

Next morning, before the others wake, Elric creeps down to the kitchen and finds the water-tub, crumbling a little dragon's venom into a tankard, and muffling his own shrieks as the stuff punishes each corpuscle, each cell and atom of his being, and then his strength and arrogance return. He can almost feel the wings beating on his body, bearing him up into the skies where his dragon brothers wait for him. A dragon-song comes to his lips but he stifles that, too. He wishes to learn, not to draw attention to himself. It is the only way he can discover the whereabouts of his father's soul.

The other two find their traveling companion in jovial humour when they come down, already grinning at a joke concerning a famished ferret and a rabbit—the gypsies have a wealth of such bucolic reference, a constant source of amusement to them.

Elric's attempts at similar banter leave them puzzled, but when Wheldrake joins in with a string of stories concerning sheep and jackboots, the ice is thoroughly broken. By the time they ride towards the west cliff and the causeway, the gypsies have decided they are acceptable enough companions and assure them that they will be more than welcome in the Gypsy Nation.

"*Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,*" warbles Wheldrake, still with his mug of breakfast porter in his hand as he leans upon his saddle and admires the grandeur of it all. "To tell you the truth of the matter, Prince Elric, I was growing a little bored with Putney. Though there was some talk of moving to Barnes."

"They are unsavoury places, then?" says Elric, happy to make ordinary conversation as they ride. "Full of sour magic and so forth?"

"Worse," says Wheldrake, "they are *South of the River*. I believe now I was writing too much. There is little else to do in Putney. Crisis is the true source of creativity, I think. And one thing, sir, that Putney promises is that you shall be free from Crisis."

Listening politely, as one does when a friend discusses the more abstruse or sticky points of their particular creed, Elric let the poet's words act as a lullaby to his still-tortured senses. It was clear that the venom's effect did not lessen with increasing use. But now, he knew, if their gypsy guides proved treacherous he would be able to kill them without much effort. He was a little contemptuous of local opinion. These ruffians might have terrorized the

farmers of these parts, but they were clearly no match for trained fighters. And he knew he could rely on the Rose in any engagement, though Wheldrake would be next to useless. There was an air of awkwardness about him which made it clear that his use of a sword was more likely to confuse than threaten any opponent.

From time to time he shared glances with his friends, but it was clear neither had any idea of an alternative. Since the ones they sought had searched for the Gypsy Nation there could be no reason for not at least discovering what exactly the Gypsy Nation was.

Elric watched as the Rose, to release some of her anxiety no doubt, suddenly let her horse have free rein and went galloping along the narrow track beside the chasm while stones and tufts of clay and turf went tumbling down into the darkness and the roar of the unseen river. Then, one by one, the gypsies followed, galloping their horses with daredevil skill in the Rose's wake, yelling and hallooing, jumping up in their saddles, leaping and diving, as if all this were completely natural to them, and now Elric laughed joyously to see *their* joy, and Wheldrake clapped and hooted like a boy at the circus. And then they had come to the great wall of garbage, higher than anything Elric had seen earlier, where more gypsies waited at a passage they had made through the waste and they greeted their fellows with all manner of heartiness, while Elric, Wheldrake and the Rose were subjected to the same off-hand contempt with which they treated all non-gypsies.

"They wish to join our free-roaming band," said the tall man in red and white. "As I told them, we never reject a recruit." And he guffawed as he accepted a somewhat overripe peach from one of the other gypsies' bags. "There's precious little to forage as usual. It's always thus at the end of the season, and at the beginning." He cocked his head suddenly. "But the season comes. Soon. We shall go to meet it."

Elric himself thought he felt the ground shivering slightly and heard something like a distant piping, a far-off drum, a drone. Was their god slithering along his causeway from one lair to the next? Were he and his companions to be sacrifices for that god? Was that what the gypsies found amusing?

"Which season?" asked the Rose, almost urgently, her long fingers combing at her curls.

"The Season of our Passing. Indeed, the *Seasons* of our Passing," said a woman spitting plum stones to the ashy filth of the ground. Then she had mounted her horse and was leading them through the passage, out onto the fleshy hardness of the great causeway, which trembled and shook as if from a distant earthquake and now, in the far distance, from the east, Elric looked down the mile-wide road and he saw movement, heard more noise, and he realized something was coming towards them even as they approached.

"Great Scott!" cried Wheldrake, lifting his hat in a gesture of amazement. "What can it be?"

It was a kind of darkness, a flickering of heavy shadows, of the occasional spark of light, of a constant and increasing shaking, which made the banks of garbage bounce and scatter and the carrion creatures rise in squawking flurries of flesh and feather. And it was still many miles off.

To the gypsies the phenomenon was so familiar they paid it not the slightest attention, but Elric, the Rose and Wheldrake could not keep their eyes away.

Now the rocking increased, a steady motion doubtless created partly by the free span of the road over the bay, until it was gentle but relentless, as if a giant's hand rocked them all in some bizarre cradle, and the shadow on the horizon grew larger and larger, filling the causeway from bank to bank.

"We are the free people. We follow the road and call no man our master!" sang out one of the women.

"Hear! Hear!" chirrups Wheldrake. "Hey-ho, for the open road!" But his voice falters a little as they draw nearer and see what now approaches, the first of many.

It is like a ship, but it is not a ship. It is a great wooden platform, as wide across as a good-sized village, with monstrous wheels on gigantic axles carrying it slowly forward. Around the bottom edge of the platform is a kind of leather curtain; around the top edge is built a stockade, and beyond that are the roofs and spires of a town, all moving on the platform, with slow, steady momentum, with dwellings for an entire tribe of settled folk.

It is only one of hundreds.

Behind that first comes another platform, with its own village, its own skyline, flying its own flags. Behind that is another. The causeway is crowded with these platforms, rumbling and creaking and, at turtle pace, ploughing steadily on, packing the refuse into the ground, making still smoother the smoothness of their road.

"My God!" whispers Wheldrake. "It is a nightmare by Brueghel! It is Blake's vision of Apocalypse!"

"It's an unnerving sight, right enough." The Rose tucks the tongue of her belt into its loop another notch and frowns. "A nomad nation, to be sure!"

"You are, it seems, pretty self-sufficient," says Wheldrake to one of the gypsies, who assents with proud gravity. "How many of those townships travel this way?"

The gypsy shakes his head and shrugs. He is not sure. "Some two thousand," he says, "but not all move as swiftly as these. There are cities of the Second Season following these, and cities of the Third Season following those."

“And the Fourth Season?”

“You know we have no fourth season. That we leave for you.” The gypsy laughs as if at a simpleton. “Otherwise we should have no wheat.”

Elric listens to the babble and the hullabaloo of the massive platforms, sees people climbing upon the walls, leaning over, shouting to one another. He smells all the stenches of any ordinary town, hears every ordinary sound, and he marvels at the things, all made of wood and iron rivets and bits bound

together with brass or copper or steel, of wood so ancient it resembles rock, of wheels so huge they would crush a man as a dog-cart casually crushes an ant. He sees the washing fluttering on lines, makes out signs announcing various crafts and trades. Soon the traveling platforms are so close they dwarf him and he must look up to see the gleam of the greased axles, the old, metal-shod wheels, each spoke of which is almost as tall as one of Imrryr's towers, the smell, the deep smell of life in all its variety. And high above his head now geese shriek, dogs put their front paws upon the ramparts and bark and snarl for the pure pleasure of barking and snarling, while children peer down at them and try to spit on the heads of the strangers, shouting catcalls and infant witticisms to those below, to be cuffed by parents who in turn remark on the oddness of the strangers and do not seem over-enthusiastic that their ranks have grown. On both sides of them now the wheels creak by and from the sides are flung the pails of slops and ordure which form both banks, while here and there, walking behind the platforms, come men, women and children armed with brooms with which they whisk the refuse up onto the heaps, disturbing the irritated carrion eaters, creating clouds of dust and flies, or sometimes pausing to squabble and scrabble over a choice piece of detritus.

"Raggle-taggle, indeed," says Master Wheldrake, putting his huge red handkerchief to his face and coughing mightily. "Pray tell me, sir—where does this great road go?"

"Go, man?" The gypsy shakes his head in disbelief. "Why nowhere and everywhere. This is our road. The road of the Free Travelers. It follows itself, little poet! It winds around the world!"

CHAPTER FOUR

On Joining the Gypsies. Some Unusual Definitions Concerning the Nature of Liberty.

And now, as Elric and his companions wandered in amazement amongst the advancing wheels, they saw that behind this first rank of moving villages came a vast mass of people; men, women and children of all ages, of all classes and in all conditions, talking and arguing and playing games as they went, some walking with an air of unconcerned familiarity in the wake of those pounding rims; others unaccountably miserable, hats in hands, weeping; their dogs and other domestic animals with them, like people on a pilgrimage. The mounted gypsies had disappeared by now, to join their own kind, and had no interest at all in the three they had found.

Wheldrake leaned down from his horse and addressed a genial matron, of the type which often took a fancy to him. His hat was swept from his red comb, his little bantam's eyes sparkled. "Forgive me for this interruption, madam. We are newcomers to your nation and thought perhaps we should seek out your authorities …"

"There are no authorities, little rooster, in the Gypsy Nation." She laughed at this absurdity. "We are all free here. We have a council, but it does not meet until the next season. If you would join us, as it seems you have already done, then you must find a village which will accept you. Failing that, you must walk." She pointed behind her without interrupting her stride. "Back there is best. The forward villages tend to be full of purebloods and they are never very welcoming. But someone there will be glad to take you in."

"We're obliged to you, ma'am."

"Many welcome the horseman," she said, as if quoting an old adage. "There is none more free than the gypsy rider."

On through this great march, which spanned the road from bank to squalid bank, rode Elric, Wheldrake and the Rose, sometimes greeting those who walked, sometimes being greeted in turn. There was in many parts a festive quality to the throng. There were snatches of song from here and there, a sudden merry barrel-organ reel, the sound of a fiddle. And elsewhere, in rhythm with their stride, people joined in a popular chant.

"We have sworn the Gypsy Oath,
To uphold the Gypsy Law,
Death to all who disobey!
Death to all who disobey!"

Of which Wheldrake was disapproving on a number of moral, ethical, aesthetic and metrical counts. "I'm all for primitivism, friend Elric, but primitivism of the finer type. This is mere xenophobia. Scarcely a national epic …"

—But which the Rose found charming.

While Elric, lifting his head as a dragon might, to scent the wind, caught sight of a boy running at unseemly speed from beneath the wheels of one of the gigantic platforms and over to the banks of refuse (now being freshened by every settlement that rolled slowly by). The boy was trying to scramble up armed with pieces of board on hands and feet which were meant to aid his progress but actually only hampered him.

He was wild with terror now and screaming, but the chanting crowd marched by as if he did not exist. The boy tried to climb back to the road but the boards trapped him further. Again his cry was piteous over the confident chanting of the marching gypsies. Then, from somewhere, a black-fletched arrow flew, taking him in the throat to silence him. Blood ran from between his writhing lips. The boy was dying. Not a soul did more than flick a glance in his direction.

The Rose was forcing her horse through the people, shouting at them for their lack of concern, trying to reach the boy whose dying movements were burying him deeper in the filth. As Elric, Wheldrake and the Rose arrived it was clear that he was dead. Elric reached towards the corpse—and another black-fletched arrow came from above to bury itself squarely in the child's heart.

Elric looked back, enraged, and only Wheldrake and the Rose together stopped him from drawing his sword and seeking the source of the arrow.

"Foul cowardice! Foul cowardice!"

"Perhaps he committed a fouler crime," cautioned the Rose. She took hold of Elric's hand, leaning from her saddle to do so. "Be patient, albino. We are here to learn what these people can tell us, not challenge their customs."

Elric accepted her wisdom. He had witnessed far crueler actions amongst his own people and knew well enough how an outrageous deed of torture could seem like simple justice to some. So he controlled himself, but looked with even more wariness upon the crowd as the Rose led them on towards the next rank of moving villages, creaking with infinite slowness, no faster than an old man's pace, along the flesh-coloured highway, their long leather skirts brushing the ground as they advanced like so many massive dowagers out for an evening stroll.

"What sorcery powers those settlements," murmured the Rose as they moved, at last, through the stragglers, "and how can we get aboard one? These people won't chat. There is something they fear …"

"Clearly, madam." Elric looked back to where the boy had died, his sprawled corpse still visible upon the piled garbage.

"A free society such as this must pay no taxes, therefore can pay no-one to police it—therefore the family and the blood-feud become the chief instruments of justice and the law," said Wheldrake, still very distressed. "They are the only recourse. I would guess the boy paid for some relative's misdemeanour, if not his own. *'Blood for blood! groaned the Desert King, And an eye, I swear, for an eye. 'Ere this day's sun sets on Omdurman, the*

Nazarene must die!' Not mine! Not mine!" he said hastily, "but a great favourite amongst the residents of Putney. M.C. O'Crook, the popular pantomime artist, wrote it I was told …"

Believing the little poet merely babbled to comfort himself, Elric and the Rose paid him little attention, and now the Rose was hailing the nearest gigantic platform which approached, its skirts scraping and hissing, and from which, through a gap in the leather curtains, there strolled a man in bright green velvet with purple trimmings, a gold ring through his earlobe, more gold about his wrists and throat, a gold chain about his waist. His dark eyes looked them over, then he shook his head curtly and returned through the curtain. Wheldrake made to follow him, but hesitated. "For what, I wonder, are we being auditioned?"

"Let's discover that by trial," said the Rose, pushing her hair back from her face and flexing a strong hand as she rode towards the next slow-moving mass, to find a head poked out at her and a red-capped woman glancing at them without much curiosity before turning back in. Another and another followed. A fellow in a painted leather jerkin and a brass helmet was more interested in their horses than themselves, but eventually jerked his thumb to dismiss them, making Elric murmur that he would have no more to do with these barbarians but would find some other path and fulfill his quest that way.

The next village sent out a well-to-do old gypsy in a headscarf and embroidered waistcoat, his black velvet breeches tucked into white stockings. "We need the horses," he said, "but you seem like intellectuals to me. The last thing this village requires are trouble-makers of that sort. So I'll bid thee fare-thee-well."

"We are valued neither for our looks nor our brains," said Wheldrake with a grin, "and only a little, it seems, for our horses."

"Persevere, Master Wheldrake," the Rose was grim, "for we must find our sisters and it's my guess a village that will admit them will also have something in common with a village that will welcome us."

It was poor logic, reflected the albino, but logic, at least, of a sort, and he had nothing better to offer.

Five more villages inspected them and five more times they were rejected until, out of a village that seemed smaller and perhaps a little better-kept than most of the others, sauntered a tall man whose somewhat gaunt appearance was tempered by a pair of amused blue eyes, his attention to costume suggesting a pleasure in life belied by his features. "Good evening to you, gentlefolk," he said, his voice musical and a little affected, "I am Amarine Goodool. You have something interesting about you. Are you artists, by any chance? Or perhaps story-tellers? Or you have, possibly, some affecting story of your own? As you see, we grow a trifle bored in Trollon."

"I am Wheldrake, the poet." The little coxcomb stepped forward without reference to his companions. "And I have written verse for kings,

queens and commoners. I have published verse, moreover, in more than one century and have pursued the vocation of poet in more than one incarnation. I have a facility with metre, sir, which all envy—peers and my betters, sir, as a matter of fact. And I also have a certain gift for spontaneous versification, of sorts. *In Trollon, elegant and slow, dwelled Amarine Goodool, famed for his costume and his wit. To friends so valuable was he, they even saved his—*"

"And I am called the Rose and travel upon a quest for vengeance. My journey has taken me through more than one realm."

"Aha!" said Amarine Goodool. "You have followed the megaflow! You have broken down the walls between the realms! You have crossed the invisible barriers of the multiverse! And you, sir? You, my pale friend? What skills have you?"

"At home, in my own quiet town, I had some reputation as a conjuror and philosopher," said Elric meekly.

"Well, well, sir, but you would not be with this company if you had not something to offer. Your philosophy, perhaps, is of an unusual sort?"

"Fairly conventional, sir, I would say."

"Nonetheless, sir. Nonetheless. You have a horse. Please enter. And be welcome to Trollon. I think it very likely you will find yourselves amongst fellow spirits here. We are all a little odd in Trollon!" And he raised his head in a friendly bray.

Now he led them through the skirts of the village, into a musky darkness lit by dim lamps so that first it was possible to perceive only the vaguest of shapes. It was as if they had entered a vast stable, with row upon row of stalls disappearing into the distance. Elric smelled horses and human sweat and as they passed up a central aisle he could look down the rows and see the glistening backs of men, women and adolescents, leaning hard against poles reaching to their chests and pushing the huge edifice forward, inch by inch. Elsewhere horses were harnessed in ranks, also, trudging on heavy hoofs as they hauled at the thick ropes attached to the roof beams.

"Leave your horses with the lad," said Amarine Goodool, indicating a ragged youth who held out his hand for a small coin and grinned with pleasure at the value of what he received. "You'll be given receipts and so on. You'll be at ease for at least a couple of seasons to be sure. Or, if you are otherwise successful, for ever. Like myself. Of course," he lowered his tone as he swung up a wooden stairway, "there are other responsibilities one must accept."

The long staircase led them, spiral by spiral, to the surface until they clambered out into a nondescript narrow sidestreet from whose open windows people looked idly down without breaking their conversation. It was a picture of such ordinariness that it contrasted all the more with the scenes below.

"Are those people down there slaves, sir?" Wheldrake had to know.

"Slaves! By no means! They are free gypsy souls, like myself. Free to wander the great highway that spans the world, to breathe the air of liberty. They merely take their turn at the marching boards, as most of us must for

some time in their lives. They perform a civic duty, sir."

"And should they not wish to perform such duty?" asked Elric quietly.

"Ah, well, sir, I can see that you are indeed a philosopher. Things so abstruse are beyond me, I fear, sir. But there are people in Trollon who would be only too pleased to debate such abstractions." He patted Elric amiably upon the shoulder. "Indeed, I can think of more than one friend of mine who will gladly welcome you."

"A prosperous place, this Trollon." The Rose looked through the gaps in the buildings to where similar villages moved at a similar pace.

"Well, we like to preserve certain standards, madam. I will arrange for your receipts."

"I do not think we plan to trade our horses here," said Elric. "We need to travel on as soon as possible."

"And travel you shall, sir. Travel, after all, is in our blood. But we must put your horses to work. Or, sir," he uttered a little snigger, "we shall not be traveling far at all, eh?"

Again a glance from the Rose stilled Elric's retort. But he was growing increasingly impatient as he thought of his dead father and the threat which hung over them both.

"We are only too happy to accept your hospitality," said the Rose diplomatically. "Are we the only people to join Trollon in recent days?"

"Did you have friends come ahead of you, lady?"

"Three sisters, perhaps?" suggested Wheldrake.

"Three sisters?" He shook his head. "I should have known if I had seen them, sir. But I will send enquiry of our neighbouring villages. Meanwhile, if you are hungry, I shall be only too happy to loan you a few credits. We have some wonderful restaurants in Trollon."

It was clear that there was little poverty in Trollon. The paint was fresh and the glass sparkling, while the streets were neat and clean as anything Elric had ever seen.

"It seems all the squalor and hardship is kept out of sight below," whispered Wheldrake. "I shall be glad to leave this place, Prince Elric."

"We might find ourselves in difficulties when we decide to end our stay." The Rose was careful not to be overheard. "Do they plan to make slaves of us, like those poor wretches down there?"

"I would guess they have no immediate intention of sending us to their marching boards," said Elric, "but I have no doubt they want us for our muscles and our horses as much as for our company. I do not intend to remain long in this place if I cannot quickly discover some clue to what I seek. I have little time." His old arrogance was returning. His old impatience.

He tried to quell them, as signs of the disease which had led to his present dilemma. He hated his own blood, his sorcery, his reliance upon his runesword, or other extraordinary means of sustenance. And when Amarine Goodool brought them into the village square (complete with shops and

public buildings and houses of evident age) to meet a committee of welcome, Elric was less than warm, though he knew that lies, hypocrisy and deception were the order of the moment. His attempt to smile did not bring any answering gaiety.

"Gweetings, gweetings," cried an apparition in green, with a little pointed beard and a hat threatening to engulf his entire head and half his body. "On behalf of the Twollon weins-men and -morts, may we vawda yoah eeks with joy. Or, in the common speech, you must considah us all, now, your bwothahs and sistahs. My name is Filigwip Nant and I wun the theatwicals …" Whereupon he proceeded to introduce a miscellaneous group of people with odd-sounding names, peculiar accents and unnatural complexions whose appearance seemed to fill Wheldrake with horrified recognition. "It could be the Putney Fine Arts Society," he murmured, "or worse, the Surbiton Poetasters—I have been a reluctant guest of them both, and many more. Ilkley, as I recall, was the worst …" and he lapsed into his own gloomy contemplations as, with a smile no more convincing than the albino's, he suffered the roll-call of parochial fame, until he opened his little beak to a sky still filled with cloud and spray and began a kind of protective declamation which had him surrounded at once by green, black and purple velvet, by rustling brocade and romantic lace, by the scent of a hundred garden flowers and herbs, by the gypsy literati. And borne away.

The Rose and Elric also had their share of temporary acolytes. This was clearly a village of some wealth, which yearned for novelty.

"We're very cosmopolitan, you know, in Trollon. Like most of the 'diddicoyim' (ha, ha) villages, we are now almost wholly made up from outsiders. I, myself, am an outsider. From another realm, you know. From Heeshigrowinaaz, actually. Are you familiar—?" A middle-aged woman with an elaborate wig and considerable paint linked her bangled arm in Elric's. "I'm Parapha Foz. My husband's Barraban Foz, of course. Isn't it boring?"

"I have the feeling," said the Rose in an undertone as she went by with her own burden of enthusiasts, "that this is to be the greatest ordeal of them all …"

But it seemed to Elric that she was also amused, especially by his own expression.

And he bowed, with graceful irony, to the inevitable.

There followed a number of initiating rituals with which Elric was unfamiliar, but which Wheldrake dreaded as being all too familiar, and the Rose accepted, as if she, too, had once known such experiences better.

There were meals and speeches and performances, tours of the oldest and quaintest parts of the village, small lectures on its history and its architecture and how wonderfully it had been restored until Elric, brooding always on his father's stolen soul, wished that they would turn into something with which he could more easily contend—like the hopping, slittering, drooling monsters of Chaos or some unreasonable demigod. He had rarely

wished so longingly to draw his sword and let it silence this mélange of prejudice, semi-ignorance, snobbery and received opinion, of loud, superior voices so thoroughly reassured by all they met and read that they believed themselves confidently, unvulnerably, totally in control of reality …

And all the while Elric thought of the poor souls below, pressing their bodies against the marching boards and sending this village, in concert with all the other free gypsy villages, in its relentless progress, inch by inch, around the world.

Unused to gaining the information he required by any means less direct than torture, Elric left it to the Rose to glean whatever she could and eventually, when they were alone together, Wheldrake having been taken as a trophy to sport at some dinner, she relaxed into a mood of satisfaction. They had been given adjoining rooms in what they were assured was the best inn of its sort in any of the second-rank villages. Tomorrow, they were told, they would be shown what apartments were available to them.

"We have survived this first day well, I think," she said, sitting on a chest to remove her doeskin boots. "We have proven interesting enough to them so that we still have our lives, relative liberty and, most important now, I think, our swords …"

"You mistrust them thoroughly, then?" The albino looked curiously at the Rose as she shook out her pale red-gold hair and peeled off her brown jerkin to reveal a blouse of dark yellow. "I have never encountered such folk before."

"Save that they are drawn from every part of the multiverse, they are very much of a type I left behind me long ago and like poor Wheldrake hoped never to encounter again. The sisters reached the Gypsy Nation less than a week before we did. The woman who told me this had it from a woman she knows in the next village. The sisters, however, were accepted by a village of the forward rank."

"And we can find them there?" Elric knew so much relief he only then realized how desperate he had become.

"Not so easily. We have no invitation to visit the village. There are forms to be observed before we can receive such an invitation. However, I also learned that Gaynor, of whom you spoke, is here, though he disappeared almost immediately and no-one has any notion of his whereabouts."

"He has not left the Nation?"

"I gather that is not easily done, even by the likes of Gaynor." There was suddenly an extra bitterness to her voice.

"It is forbidden?"

"Nothing," she echoed sardonically, "is forbidden in the Gypsy Nation. Unless," she added, "it is change of any kind!"

"Then why was the boy killed?"

"They tell me they know nothing about it. They told me they thought I was probably mistaken. They said they felt it was morbid to study the garbage

heaps and think one saw things lurking in them. In short, as far as they are concerned, no boy was killed."

"He was trying to escape, however. We both saw that. From what, my lady?"

"They will not say, Prince Elric. There are subjects forbidden by good manners, it seems. As in many societies, I suppose, where the very fundamentals of their existence are the subject of the deepest taboos. What is this terror of reality, I wonder, which plagues the human spirit?"

"I am not, at present, looking for the answers to such questions, madam," said Elric, finding even the Rose's speculations irritating after so much babble. "My own view is that we should leave Trollon and head back to the village which accepted the three sisters. Did they know the name?"

"Duntrollin. Odd that they should accept the sisters at all. They are some kind of warrior-order, I understand, pledged to the defense of the road and its travelers. The Gypsy Nation is comprised of thousands of such mobile cantons, each with its peculiar contribution to the whole. A dream of democratic perfection, one might suppose."

"Were it not for the marching boards," said Elric, disturbed, even now, to know that as he prepared himself for rest, the great platform on which all this existed was being pushed gradually forward by emaciated men, women and children.

He slept badly that night, though he was not plagued by his usual nightmares. And for that small mercy he was grateful.

Breakfasting in a common hall, still hygienically free of any sign of a real commoner, served by young women in peasant frocks who found their work amusing rather than arduous, like children in a play, the three friends again shared what little they had discovered.

"They never stop moving," said Wheldrake. "The very thought is hideous to them. They believe their entire society will be destroyed if once they bring this vast caravan to a halt. So their *hoi polloi*, whatever their circumstances, push, with or without the help of horses, the villages on. And it is debtors and vagabonds and defaulters and creators of minor grievances who make up the throng walking on the road. These are, as it were, middle-class offenders of no great consequence. The fear of all is that they should join those at the marching boards and therefore lose their status and most chances of regaining it again. Their morals and their laws are based upon the rock, as it were, of perpetual motion. The boy wanted to stop walking, I gather, and there is only one rule where that is concerned—Move or Die. And Move Forward Always. I've lived in Gloriana's age, and Victoria's, and Elizabeth's, yet never have I encountered quite such fascinating and original hypocrisies."

"Are there no exceptions? Must everyone constantly move?" asked the Rose.

"There are no exceptions." Wheldrake helped himself to a dish of mixed meats and cheeses. "I must say that their standard of cuisine is

excellent. One becomes so grateful for such things. If you were ever, for instance, in Ripon and had a positive dislike of the pie, you would starve." He poured himself a little light beer. "So we have our sisters. We believe Gaynor could be with them. We now need an invitation to Duntrollin, I take it. Which reminds me, why have they not asked you to give up your weapons? None here appears to sport a blade."

"I think they might be our next means of earning a season or two away from the boards," said Elric, who had also considered this. "They have no need to demand them. They will, they believe, possess them soon—for rent, or food or whatever it is they know people always prefer to liberty …" And he chewed moodily on his bread and stared into the middle-distance, lost in some unhappy memory.

"Thus by deep injustice is that Unjust State upheld;
Thus by gags of deedless piety old Albion's voice is still'd."

intoned the little poet, rather mournful himself. "Is there no luxury that is not the creation of someone else's misery?" he wondered. "Was there ever a world where all were equal?"

"Oh, indeed," said the Rose with some alacrity. "Indeed, there was. My own!" And then she hesitated, thought better of her outburst, and fell silent over her porridge, leaving the others at something of a loss for conversation.

"Why, I wonder, are we discouraged from leaving this paradise?" said Elric at last. "How does the Gypsy Nation justify its strictures?"

"By one of a thousand similar arguments, friend Elric, I'm sure. Something circular, no doubt. And singularly apt, all in all. One is never short of metaphors as one travels the multiverse."

"I suppose not, Master Wheldrake. But perhaps that circular argument is the only means by which any of us rationalizes their existence?"

"Indeed, sir. Quite likely."

And now the Rose was joining in with *sotto voce* reminders to Wheldrake that they were not here as Detectives of the Abstract but were searching with some urgency for the three sisters, who carried with them certain objects of power—or, at least, a key to the discovery of those objects. Wheldrake, knowing his own weakness for such tempting trains of thought, apologized. But before they could resume the subject of leaving Trollon and somehow gaining access to Duntrollin the outer doors of the room swung inwards to reveal a magnificent figure, all ballooning silks and lace, a mighty wig staggering on his head and his exquisite face painted with all the subtlety of a Jharkorian concubine.

"Forgive my interrupting your breakfast. My name is Vailadez Rench, at your service. I am here, dear friends, to offer you a choice of accommodation, so that you may begin to fit in with our community as quickly as possible. I gather you have the means of taking quarters of the better type?"

Having no choice for the moment, unless they were to arouse the Trollonian's suspicions, they followed meekly in Vailadez Rench's wake as the tall exquisite led them through the tidy and rather over-polished lanes of his picturesque little town. And still, inch by inch, the Gypsy Nation rolled on along the road it had beaten for centuries, creating a momentum that must be maintained above all other considerations. And forever returning to the identical point of arrival and departure.

They were shown a house upon the edge of the platform, looking out over the walls towards the distant walkers and the other snail-crawling settlements. They were shown apartments in quaint old gabled houses or converted from warehouses or stores, and eventually they were led by Vailadez Rench, whose sole conversation revolved, like some tight-wrought fugue, about the subject of Property, its desirability and its value, to a little house with a patch of garden outside it, the walls covered in climbing tea-roses and brilliant nunshabit, all glowing purples and golds, the windows glittering and framed by lace, and smelling sweet and fresh as spring from the herb-beds and the flowers; the Rose clapped her hands and for a moment it was clear she was tempted by the house, with its crooked roof and time-black gables. Something within her longed for such ordinary beauty and comfort. And Elric saw her expression change and she looked away. "It's pretty, this house," she said. "Perhaps it could be shared by all of us?"

"Oh, yes. It has a family, you see. Quite large. But they had their tragedies, you know, and must leave." Vailadez Rench sighed, then grinned and wagged a finger at her. "You've chosen the most expensive, yet! You have taste, dear lady."

Wheldrake, who had taken a gloomy dislike of this Paladin of Property, made some graceless remark which was ignored by everyone, for all their different reasons. He reached his nose towards a luscious paeony bush. "Is their scent here?"

Vailadez Rench rapped upon a door he could not open. "They were given their documents. They should be gone. There was some kind of disaster … Well, we must be merciful, I suppose, and thank the stars we are not ourselves sliding towards the board-hold and the eternal tramp."

The door was opened with a snap—wide—and there stood before them a disheveled, round-eyed, red-faced fellow, almost as tall as Elric, with a quill in one hand and an inkpot in the other. "Dear sir! Dear sir! Bear with me, I beg you. I am at this very moment addressing a letter to a relative. There is no question of my credit. You know yourself what delays exist, these days, between the villages." He scratched his untidy, corn-coloured hair with the nib of his pen, causing dark green ink to run down his forehead and give him something of the appearance of a demented savage prepared for war. While his alert blue eyes went from face to face, his lips appealed. "I have such clients! Bills are not paid, you know, by dead people. Or by disappointed people. I am a clairvoyant. It is my vocation. My dear mother is a clairvoyant,

and my brothers and sisters and, greatest of all, my noble son, Koropith. My Uncle Grett was famous across the Nation and beyond. Still more famous were we all before our fall."

"Your fall, sir?" asked Wheldrake, very curious and taking to the man at once. "Your debts?"

"Debt, sir, has pursued us across the multiverse. That is a constant, sir. It is *our* constant, at least. I speak of our fall from the king's favour, in the land my family had made its own and hoped to settle. Salgarafad, it was called, in a rim-sphere long forgotten by the Old Gardener, and why should it be otherwise? But death is not our fault, sir. It is not. We are friends to Death, but not His servants. And the king swore we had brought the plague by predicting it. And so we were forced to flee. Politics, in my view, had much to do with the matter. But we are not permitted to the counsels of the steersmen, let alone the Lords of the Higher Worlds, whom we serve, sir, in our own way, my family and myself."

This speech concluded, he drew breath, put one inky fist upon his right hip, the second, still holding the bottle, he rested across his chest. "The credits are," he insisted, "in the post."

"Then you can be found easily enough, dear sir, and reinstated here. Perhaps another house? But I would remind you, your credits were based upon certain services performed by your sister and your uncle on behalf of the community. And they are no longer resident here."

"You put them to the boards!" cried the threatened resident. "You gave them up to the marching boards. Admit it!"

"I am not privy to such matters. This property, sir, is required. Here are the new renters …"

"No," says the Rose, "not so. I will not be the cause of this man and his family losing their home!"

"Sentiment! Silly sentiment!" Vailadez Rench roared with laughter that held in it every kind of insult, every heartless mockery. "My dear madam, this family has rented property it cannot afford. You *can* afford it. That is a simple, natural rule, sir. That is a fact of the world, sir." (These last addressed to the offending debtor.) "Let us through, sir. Let us through. We uphold our time-honoured Right to View!" With which he pushed past the unfortunate letter-writer and drew the puzzled trio behind him into a dark passageway from which stairs led. From the landing peered bright button-eyes which might have belonged to a weasel, while from the stairs another pair of eyes regarded them with smouldering rage. They entered a large, untidy room, full of threadbare furnishings and old documents, where, in a wheeled chair made of ivory and boarwood, a tiny figure sat hunched. Again only the eyes seemed alive—black, penetrating eyes of no apparent intelligence. "Mother, they invade!" cried the besieged householder. "Oh, sir, you are cruel, to practise such fierce rectitude upon a frail old woman! How can she walk, sir? How can she move?"

"She must be pushed, Master Fallogard! She will roll as we all roll. Forward, always forward. To a finer future, Master Fallogard. We work for that, you know." Vailadez Rench stooped to peer at the old woman. "Thus do we maintain the integrity of our great Nation."

"I had read somewhere," said Master Wheldrake quietly, stepping a little further into the room and inspecting it as if he truly intended to make it his home, "that a society dedicated solely to the preservation of her past, soon has only her past to sell. Why not stop the village, Master Rench, so that the old lady shall not have to move?"

"You enjoy these obscenities, I suppose, sir, in your own realm? They are not appreciated here." Vailadez Rench looked down his long nose—a stork offering a parakeet only disdain. "The platforms must *always* move. The Nation must *always* move. There can be no *pause* to the gypsy's way. And any who would *block* our way are our *enemies*! Any not invited to set foot on our road but who tread it in defiance of our laws—they are our *deadly* enemies, for they represent the many who would block our way and attempt to bring to a halt the Gypsy Nation, which has traveled, for more than a thousand times, the circumference of the world, over land and sea, along the road of their own making. The Free Road of the Free Gypsy People!"

"I, too, was taught schoolboy litanies to explain the follies of my own country," said Wheldrake, turning away. "I have no quarrel with such wounded, needy souls as yourself, who must chant a creed as some kind of primitive charm against the unknown. It seems to me, as I travel the multiverse, that reliance upon such insistencies is what all mortals have in common. Million upon million of different tribes, each with its own fiercely defended truth."

"Bravo, sir!" cries Fallogard Phatt with a wave of his generous quill (and ink goes flying over mother, books and papers), "but do not elaborate on such sentiments, I warn you! They are mine. They are my whole family's, yet they are forbidden here, as in so many worlds. Do not speak so frankly, sir, lest you'd follow my uncle and my sister to the boards and the Long Stroll to Oblivion."

"Heretic! You have no right to such fine Property!" Vailadez Rench's lugubrious features twist with dismay, his delicate paint glowing from the heat of his own offended blood, as if some exotic fruit of Eden had bloomed and given voice simultaneously. "Evictors must be summoned and that will not be pleasant for Fallogard Phatt and the Family Phatt!"

"What remains of it," grumbles Phatt, suddenly downhearted, as if he had always anticipated his defeat. "I have a dozen futures. Which to pick?" And he closes his eyes and screws up his face as if he, too, has sipped a dragon's diluted venom, and he lets out a great keening noise, the cry of a wronged soul, the despairing voice of a creature which sees Justice suddenly as a Chimera and all displays of it a mere Charade. "A dozen futures, but still no fairness for the common folk! Where does this Tanelorn, this paradise,

exist?"

And Elric, who is the only one Phatt is ever likely to meet who could supply him with anything but a metaphysical answer, remains silent, for in Tanelorn he took a vow as all do who receive her protection and her peace. Only true seekers after peace shall find Tanelorn, for Tanelorn is a secret carried by every mortal. And Tanelorn exists wherever mortals gather in mutual determination to serve the common good, creating as many paradises as there are human souls …

"I was told," he said, "that it exists within oneself."

At which Fallogard Phatt laid down his pen and ink, picked up a sack in which he had already, it appeared, packed his necessities, and began with downcast eyes to wheel his old mother from the room, calling out for the other members of his family as he did so.

Vailadez Rench watched them trail off with their bundles and their keepsakes and sniffed with considerable satisfaction as he looked around the house. "A lick of paint will soon brighten this property," he assured them, "and we will, of course, have all this clutter sent for salvage and put to efficient use. We are well rid, I'm sure you will agree, of the Family Phatt and that disgusting valetudinarian!"

By now Elric's self-control was growing weak and had it not been for the Rose's steady eyes upon him, for Wheldrake's grim and furious silence, he would have spoken his mind. As it was, the Rose approved the house, agreed the lease and accepted the keys from the fastidious fingers of that Sultan of Sophistry, dismissed him swiftly and then led them in hurried pursuit of the exiled debtors, sighting them as they made their way slowly towards the nearest downside stairway.

Elric saw her catch up with Fallogard Phatt, place a comforting hand upon the shoulder of an adolescent girl, whisper a word in the ear of the mother, give a friendly tug to the hair of the boy, and bring them, bewildered, back with her. "They are to live with us—or at least upon our credit. That cannot, surely, be against even the Gypsy Nation's peculiar sense of security."

Elric regarded the threadbare group with some dismay, having no wish to burden himself with a family, especially one which seemed to him so feckless. He glanced at the girl, dark and petulant in her blossoming beauty, her expression one of almost permanent contempt for everything she looked upon, while the boy, aged about ten, had the black eyes he had noted on the stairs: the weasel's alert and eager eyes, and a narrow, pointed face to add to the effect, his long, blond hair slicked hard against his skull, his small-fingered hands twitching and eager, the nose questing, as if he already scented vermin. And when he grinned, in grateful understanding of the Rose's charity, he revealed sharp little teeth, white against the moist redness of his lips. "You shall see an end to your quest, lady," he said. "Blood and sap shall blend again —lest Chaos decide to challenge this prognosis. There is a road between the worlds that leads to a better place than the one on which we travel. You must

take the Infinite Path, lady, and look at the end of it for the resolution to your troubles."

Instead of responding with puzzlement or fear to his strange words, the Rose smiled and bent to kiss him. "Clairvoyant, all of you?" she asked.

"It is the chief business of the Family Phatt," said Fallogard Phatt with some dignity. "It has always been our privilege to read the cards, see through the crystal's mist and know the future such as it ever can be foretold with any certainty. Which is why, of course, we were not unhappy when we found we must join the Gypsy Nation. But, we discovered, these folk have no true clairvoyance, merely a collection of tricks and illusions with which to impress or control others. Once their people had the richest powers of all. They dissipated, little by little, on their pointless march around the world. They gave them up for security you see. And now we, too, have no use for our powers …" He sighed and scratched rapidly at himself in several places, adjusting buttons and loops and ties as he did so, as if he only just realized his disheveled condition. "What are we to do? Should we become walkers, we shall inevitably be doomed to end our days at the marching boards."

"We would join forces with you," Elric heard the Rose say, and he looked at her in surprise. "We have the power to help you against the jurisdiction of the Gypsy Nation. And you have the power to help us find what we seek here. There are three sisters we must discover. Perhaps they have another with them now, an armoured man whose face is never revealed."

"It is my mother you must ask in that respect," said Fallogard Phatt absently, as he considered her words. "And my niece. Charion has all her grandmother's skills, I think, though she must learn more wisdom yet …"

The girl glared at him, but she seemed flattered.

"It is my boy Koropith Phatt, who is the greatest of all Phatts," said his father, laying a proud and perhaps proprietorial hand upon the infant, whose little black eyes regarded his father with amused affection and a certain knowing sympathy. "There has never *been* a Phatt as full of the gift as Koropith. He is *brimming* with psychic advantages!"

"Then he and we must come to our arrangements quickly," said the Rose. "For the time is here when we must seek a means of charting a specific course between the worlds. If we can free you, can you lead us where we must go?"

"I have that ability, at least," said Fallogard Phatt, "and will gladly aid you however I can. But the boy has found pathways through the realms I had not even heard rumoured. And the girl can seek out an individual through all the layers of the multiverse. She is a bloodhound, that child. She is a terrier. She is a spaniel …"

Interrupting this effusion of canine comparisons, Master Wheldrake found a book in one of his inner pockets and drew it forth with a flourish. "Here's what I remembered having! Here it is!"

They looked at him in polite expectation as he pulled his newly

received credits from his waistcoat and pushed them into the hands of the baffled boy. “Here, young Master Koropith, go with your cousin to the market! I’ll give you a list. Tonight I intend to make us all a meal substantial enough to help us through our coming adventure!”

He brandished the scarlet book. “Between Mrs. Beeton and myself I think I can provide us with a supper the like of which you’ll not have tasted in a twelvemonth!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Conversations with Clairvoyants Concerning the Nature of the Multiverse &c. Dramatic Methods of Escape.

The elaborate and exquisite feast over, and soothed by a recitation of some excellent sonnets, even Elric was able to divert his attention, for a little while, away from the persistent memory of his dead father waiting for him in that dead city.

"We have lived by our wits, the Phatts, for generations." Fallogard Phatt was in his cups. Even his old mother put wine to her wizened lips and occasionally giggled. His son and niece were either in bed or hidden in the stairwell's shadows. Wheldrake refilled Mother Phatt's bumper while the Rose sat back in her chair, the only one determined to keep her mind upon the crucial issues of their circumstances. She drank no wine, but seemed content to let the others relax as they wished. Next to her around the table, Elric sipped the dark blue-black stuff and wished that it could have some effect upon him, reflecting sardonically to himself that after a draught of dragon's venom most drinks had something of an insipid quality …

"There are only a few adepts," Fallogard Phatt was saying, "who have ever explored even a fraction of the multiverse, but the Phatts, I must say, are as experienced as any. Mother here, for instance, has the routes of at least two thousand different pathways between some five thousand realms. Her instincts are occasionally a little dulled, these days, but our niece is learning well. She has the same talent."

"So you sought this plane deliberately?" said the Rose suddenly, as if his remarks coincided with her own thoughts.

This produced a wild peal of laughter in Fallogard Phatt, threatening to burst his thoroughly buttoned waistcoat while his hair sprang up around his head and his face grew red. "No, madam, that's the joke of it. Few here *ever* came because they had heard of the Gypsy Nation and wished to join it. But the Nation has set up its own peculiar field—a kind of psychic gravity—which draws many here who would otherwise be in limbo. It acts—in a psychic, but also in an oddly material way, too—as a kind of false-limbo, a world of lost souls, indeed."

"Lost souls?" Elric now grew alert. "Lost souls, Master Phatt?"

"And bodies, too, of course. For the most part." Fallogard Phatt made a drunken movement with his hand then paused, as if he heard something, then peered with sudden intelligence into the albino's crimson eyes. "Aye, sir," he said in a quieter tone, "lost souls, indeed!" And Elric felt for a few seconds the sense of some benign presence within him, sympathetic and perhaps even protective. The sensation was quickly gone and Phatt was holding forth to Wheldrake on some jolly abstraction which seemed to excite them both, but the Rose was, if anything, more thoughtful as she glanced from

Phatt to Elric and, frequently, at the busy head of little Mother Phatt, who sat with her two hands clutching her wine-cup, nodding and smiling and scarcely following, or caring to follow, the general drift, yet seemingly content and alert in her own mysterious way.

"I find it difficult to imagine, sir," Wheldrake was saying. "It is a trifle frightening, too, moreover, to contemplate such vastness. So many worlds, so many tribes, and each with a different understanding of the nature of reality! Billions of them, sir. Billions and billions—an infinity of possibilities and alternatives! And Law and Chaos fight to control all that?"

"The war is at present unadmitted," said Phatt. "Instead there are skirmishes here and there, battles for a world or two, or at best a realm. But a great conjunction is coming and it is then that the Lords of the Higher Worlds wish to establish their rule throughout the Spheres. Each Sphere contains a universe and there are thought to be at least a million of them. This is no ordinary cosmic event!"

"They fight to control infinity!" Wheldrake was impressed.

"The multiverse is not infinite in the strictest sense …" began Phatt, to be interrupted by his mother, suddenly shrill with irritability.

"Infinity? Loose talk! Infinity? The multiverse is *finite*. It has limits and dimensions which only a god may occasionally perceive—but they *are* limits and dimensions! Otherwise there would be no point in it!"

"In what, Mother?" Even Fallogard was surprised. "In what?"

"In the Family Phatt, of course. It is our firm belief that we shall one day—" And she left her son to recite the bulk of what was evidently the family creed …

"—learn the plan of the entire multiverse and travel at will from Sphere to Sphere, from realm to realm, from world to world, travel through the great clouds of shifting, multicoloured stars, the tumbling planets in all their millions, through galaxies that swarm like gnats in a summer garden, and rivers of light—glory beyond glory—pathways of moonbeams between the roaming stars.

"Why, sir, have you ever sometimes stood alone and seen visions? That moment, you recall, when you pause and are granted a glimpse of near-eternity, the multiverse? You might glance at a cloud or a burning log, you might notice a certain fold in a blanket, or the angle at which a blade of grass stands—it does not matter. You know what you have seen and it brings that larger vision. Yesterday, for instance—?" And he cocked an enquiring eye at the poet before receiving his new friend's approval to continue.

"—for instance, I look up at about noon. Silver light pours like water down the massed clouds, themselves vast floating asymmetric sea-beasts so large they are host to whole nations of other species, including, surely, Man? As if they entirely surfaced from their element, ready to plunge again into depths as mysterious to those below as oceans are to those above them." His face glowed a richer red with all this bright recollection, his eyes appeared to

focus again upon those clouds, upon those monumental natural barges, like raised wrecks, alarmingly complete after millennia, alien beyond imagining, beyond any impulse of ordinary mortals to follow, which one's very soul yearned to forget, those obscenely ancient beast-ships grown insubstantial in their sudden element, this brilliancy of sun and sky, and gradually their outlines dim, turn grey and fade one into another until only the sun and the sky remain, witnesses of their unmourned passing. "Have they grown invisible or are they gone for ever, even from our blood's strange memory, that tiny speck of ancestral matter that informs our race's united soul? Would that be to say they never existed and never could exist? Many things existed before our ancestors ever lifted one webbed foot upon a steamy shore …"

And Elric smiled at this, for his race's memory went back before mankind's, at least in his own realm. His folk, older and unhuman settlers, pursued or banished or otherwise escaping through the realms, had been victims of a mighty catastrophe, perhaps of their own creation.

Memory follows memory, memory defeats memory; some things are banished only into the realms of our rich imaginings—but this does not mean that they do not or cannot or will not exist—they exist! They exist!

The last Melnibonéan thinks of his people's history and legends, and he tells his human friends some of what he knows and one day a human scribe will write these remembered words which will become in turn the foundation for whole cycles of myths, whole volumes of legend and superstition, so that a grain of a grain of prehuman memory is carried over to us, blood to blood, life to life. And the cycles turn and spin and intersect at unpredictable points in an eternity of possibilities, paradoxes and conjunctions, and one tale feeds another and one anecdote provides others with entire epics. Thus we influence past, present and future and all their possibilities. Thus are we all responsible for one another, through all the myriad dimensions of time and space that make up the multiverse …

"Human love," says Fallogard Phatt, turning his eyes from his vision, "it is finally our only real weapon against entropy …"

"Without Chaos and Law in balance," says Wheldrake, reaching for some cheese and wondering, idly, which terrorized region along the road provided that particular tribute, "we rob ourselves of the greatest possible number of choices. That is the singular paradox of this conflict between the Higher Worlds. Let one become dominant and half of what we have is lost. I cannot but sometimes feel that our fate is in the hands of creatures hardly more intelligent than a stoat!"

"Intelligence and power were never the same thing," murmurs the Rose, departing from her own train of thought for a moment. "Frequently a lust for power is nothing more than an impulse of the stupidly baffled who cannot understand why they have been treated so badly by Dame Fortune. Who can blame those brutes, sometimes? They are outraged by random Nature. Perhaps these gods feel the same? Perhaps they make us endure such

awful trials because they know we are actually superior to them? Perhaps they have become senile and forget the point of their old truces?"

"You speak truth in one area, madam," said Elric. "Nature distributes power with about the same lack of discrimination as she distributes intelligence or beauty or wealth, indeed!"

"Which is why mankind," says Wheldrake, revealing a little of his own background, "has a duty to correct such mistakes of justice that Nature makes. That is why we must provide for those whom random Nature creates poor, or sick or otherwise distressed. If we do not do this, I think, then we are not fulfilling our own natural function. I speak," he said hastily, "as an agnostic. I am a thorough-going Radical, make no mistake. Yet it does seem to me that Paracelsus had it when he suggested …"

Whereupon the Rose, growing skillful at such things, halted his ascent into the realms of abstraction by enquiring loudly of Mother Phatt if she required more cheese.

"Cheese enough tonight," said the old woman mysteriously, but her smile was friendly. "Always moving. Always moving. Heel and toe, the walkers go. Heel and toe, heel and toe. All walking, my dear, in the hope of escaping their damnation. Unchanging; generation upon generation; injustice upon injustice; and sustained by further injustice. Heel and toe, the walkers go. Always moving. Always moving …" And she subsided almost gratefully into staring silence.

"Ah, such an infamous society, sir," says her son, with a sage nod, an approving wave of a biscuit. "Infamous. It is a lie, sir. A mighty deception, this 'free nation' that always seems to proceed, yet never changes! Is that not true decadence, sir?"

"Shall it be Engeland's fate, I wonder," mused Wheldrake of some lost home. "Is it the fate of all unjust empires? Oh, I fear I see the future of my country!"

"Certainly it became the only future of my own," said Elric with a grin that revealed much more than it attempted to hide. "And that is why Melniboné collapsed like a worm-eaten husk, almost at a touch …"

"Now," says the Rose, "down to business." And she sketches a plan to move at night between the wheels and find Duntrollin, there to skulk amongst the marching boards until such time as they could gain the stairs—from there Fallogard Phatt would be their bloodhound, his clairvoyance focused to find the three sisters. "But we must discuss the details," she says, "there could be practicalities, Master Phatt, that I have overlooked."

"A few, ma'am, to be sure." Politely, he listed them. The flaps to the marching boards would be guarded. The warrior inhabitants of Duntrollin would almost certainly be prepared for such an attempt as theirs. He had never seen the sisters and therefore his gift would be unreliable. What was more, even when they had reached the sisters there was no certainty they would be welcomed by them. And then, how were they to leave the Gypsy Nation? The

barriers of garbage were almost impossible to cross and the guardians always detected would-be escapers. Besides, it was useless for the Family Phatt to consider such things since they were trapped by that peculiar form of psychic gravity which brought so many poor souls to this road, to dwell upon it, or under it, for ever. "We are all of us trapped here by more than a few black-fletched arrows and a refuse heap," he said. "The Gypsy Nation controls this world, my friends. It has gained a strange, dark power. It has struck bargains. It has harnessed something of Chaos to its own uses. That, I believe, is why they dare not stop. Everything depends on maintaining their momentum."

"Then *we* must stop the Nation moving," said the Rose simply.

"Nothing can do that, madam." Fallogard Phatt shook a sad and despairing head. "It exists to move. It moves to exist. That is why the road is never changed, but rebuilt, even when land has fallen away, as in the bay we shall soon be crossing. They *cannot* change the road. I put it to them, when we first arrived. They told me it was too expensive, that the community could not afford it. But the fact is they can no more break their orbit than can a planet change her course around the sun. And if we tried to escape it would be like a pebble attempting to escape gravity. We were told that our main concern here should be to stay in the villages but never *below* the villages!"

"This is a mere prison," says Wheldrake, still picking at the cheeses, "not a nation. It is a foul disturbance in the order of things. It is dead and maintained by death. Unjust and maintained by injustice. Cruel and sustained by cruelty. And yet, as we have seen, the folk of Trollon congratulate themselves upon their urbanity, their humanity, their kindness and their graceful manners: while the dead stagger under their feet, supporting them in all their self-deceiving folly! Producing this parody of progress!"

Mother Phatt's old head turned to regard Wheldrake. She chuckled at him, not mockingly but with affection. "My brother told them as much, and continued to tell them as much. But he died on the marching boards, nonetheless. I was with him. I felt him die."

"Ah!" said Wheldrake, as if he shared that death also. "This is an evil parody of freedom and justice! It is a lie of profound dishonesty! For while *one* soul in this world suffers what hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, now suffer, they are culpable."

"They are fine fellows all, in Trollon," said Fallogard Phatt ironically. "They are persons of good will and charity. They pride themselves on their wisdom and their equity …"

"No," says Wheldrake with an angry shake of his flaming comb, "they may accept that they are *lucky*, but cannot believe themselves either wise or good! For in the end such folk agree to any device which keeps them in privilege and ease, and so maintain their rulers, electing them with every show of democratic and republican zeal. It is the way of it, sir. And they do not ever address the injustice of it, sir. This makes them hypocrites through and through. If I had my way, sir, I would bring this whole miserable charade of

progress to a halt!"

"Stop the progress of the Gypsy Nation!" Fallogard Phatt laughed with considerable glee, adding with pretended gravity, "Be careful, my dear sir. Here you are amongst friends—but in other circles such sentiments are the sheerest heresy! Be silent, sir. For your own sake!"

"Be silent! That is the perpetual admonition of Tyranny. Tyranny bellows 'Be silent!' even to the screams of its victims, the pathetic moans and groanings and supplications of its trampled millions. We are one, sir—or we are fragmented carrion which worms permit the false appearance of Life—corpses that twitch and tremble with their weight of maggots—the rotten carcass politic of an ideal freedom. The Free Gypsy Nation is an enormous falsehood! Movement, sir, is not Freedom!" Wheldrake drew furious breath.

From the corner of his eye, Elric saw the Rose get up from her chair and leave the room. He guessed that she had grown bored with the debate.

"The Wheel of Time groans and turns a million cogs which turn a million cogs again and so on, through infinity—or near infinity," said Phatt with a glance at his mother, who had closed her eyes again. "All mortals are its prisoners and its stewards. That is the inescapable truth."

"One may mirror the truth or seek to assuage it," said Elric. "Sometimes one can even try to change it …"

Wheldrake took a sudden pull on his bumper. "I was not raised to a world, sir, where truth was malleable and reality a question of what you made it. It is hard for me to hear such notions. Indeed, sir, I will admit to you that it alarms me. Not that I fail to appreciate the wonder of it, sir, or the optimism which you are, in your own way, expressing. It is just that I was born to trust and celebrate certain senses and accept that a great unchanging beauty was the order of the universe, a set of natural laws which, as it were, coincided in subtle ways with a mighty machine—intricate and complex but ultimately rational. This Nature, sir, was what I celebrated and worshipped, as others might celebrate and worship a Deity. What you suggest, sir, seems to me retrogressive. These, surely, are closer to the discredited notions of alchemy?"

And so the discussion continued until they all grew weary with the sound of their own voices and were not reluctant to seek their beds.

As Elric climbed the stairs, his lamp throwing enormous shadows on the limewashed walls, he wondered at the Rose's sudden departure from the table and hoped that something had not offended her. Normally he would have cared little about such things, but he had a respect for the woman which went beyond mere appreciation of her intelligence and beauty. There was also an air of tranquility about her which reminded him, in an odd way, of his time in Tanelorn. It was hard to believe that a woman of such evident integrity and wisdom was bent upon the resolution of a crude blood-feud.

In the narrow room he had chosen for himself, little more than a cupboard with a cot in it, he prepared himself for sleep. The Family Phatt had readily made them comfortable while involving themselves in only the

minimum disruption, and had agreed to use their psychic powers in the service of the Rose's quest. Meanwhile, the albino would rest. He was weary and he was yearning deeply now for a world he could never know again. A world that he himself had destroyed.

Now the albino sleeps and his lean, pale body turns this way and that; a groan escapes the large, sensitive lips and once, even, the crimson eyes open wide and stare with terror into the darkness.

"*Elric," says a voice, full of old rage and grief so great it has actually become a fixed aspect of the timbre, "my son. Hast thou found my soul? It is hard for me here. It is cold. It is lonely. Soon, whether I wish it or no, I must join thee. I must enter thy body and be forever part of thee …*"

And Elric wakes with a scream that seems to fill the void in which he floats and his scream continues in his ears, finding an echo in another scream, until both are screaming in unison and he looks for his father's face, but it is not his father who screams …

It is an old woman—wise and tactful, full of extraordinary knowledge —who screams as if demented, as if in the grip of the most horrible torture, screams out "NO!"—screams "STOP!"—screams "THEY FALL—OH, DEAR ASTARTE, THEY FALL!"

Mother Phatt is screaming. Mother Phatt has a vision of such unbearable intensity her screaming cannot relieve the pain she experiences. And she becomes silent.

As the world is silent, save for the slow rumbling of the monstrous wheels, the steady, faraway sound of marching feet, never stopping, marching around the world …

"*STOP!" cries the albino prince, but does not know what he commands. He has had just the merest glimpse of Mother Phatt's vision …*

Now there are ordinary sounds outside his door. He hears Fallogard Phatt calling to his mother, hears Charion Phatt sobbing and realizes there is uproar close to hand …

With his lamp relit and in his borrowed linen, Elric goes out upon the landing and sees through the open door Mother Phatt, bolt upright in her bed, her old lips flecked with foam, her eyes staring ahead of her, frightened and sightless. "They fall!" she moans. "Oh, how they fall. It should not come to this. Poor souls! Poor souls!"

Charion Phatt holds her grandmother in her arms and rocks her a little, as if she seeks to comfort a child wakened in a nightmare. "*No, Granny, no! No, Granny, no!*" Yet it is evident from her own expression that she, too, has seen something utterly terrifying. And her uncle, beside himself—sweating, red, flustered, pleading, holding his own poor tangled head as if to shield it from bombardment, cries: "It is not! It cannot! Oh, and she has stolen the boy!"

"No, no," says Charion, shaking her head. "He went willingly. That was why you did not sense any danger. He did not believe there was any!"

"She plans this?" moans Fallogard Phatt in outraged disbelief. "She plans such *death*?"

"Bring him back," says Mother Phatt harshly, her eyes still blind to the world around her. "Get her back quickly. Find her and you shall save him."

"They went to Duntrollin to seek the sisters," Charion says. "They found them, but there was another … A battle? I cannot read in such confusion. Oh, Uncle Fallogard, they must be stopped." She grimaces in agony, clutching at her face. "Uncle! Such psychic disruptions!"

And Fallogard Phatt, too, is shaking with the pain of the experience while Elric, joined by Wheldrake, tries urgently to discover what it is they fear so much. "It is a wind howling through the multiverse," says Phatt. "A black wind howling through the multiverse! Oh, this is the work of Chaos. Who would have guessed it?"

"No," says Mother Phatt. "She does not serve Chaos, neither does she call on Chaos! Yet …"

"Stop them!" cries Charion.

And Fallogard Phatt raises long fingers in helpless despair. "It is too late. We are already witnessing the destruction!"

"Not yet," says Mother Phatt. "Not yet. There could be time … But it is so strong …"

Elric no longer bothered with thought. The Rose was in danger. Hurriedly the albino returned to his room and dressed, buckling on his blade. Wheldrake was with him as they left the house and ran through the wooden streets of Trollon, taking wrong directions in the unfamiliar darkness, until they found a stairway down to the marching boards and Elric, to whom caution was only ever a half-learned lesson, had drawn Stormbringer from its scabbard so that the black blade glowed with a formidable darkness and the runes writhed and twisted along its length, and suddenly was killing anyone with a weapon who sought to stop him.

Wheldrake, seeing the faces of the slain, shuddered and hardly knew whether to stay close to the albino or put a safe distance between them while Fallogard Phatt and what remained of the Family Phatt were themselves attempting to follow, carrying the old woman in her chair.

Elric knew only that the Rose was in certain danger. At last his patience had deserted him and it was almost with relief that he let the hellsword take its toll of blood and souls, while he felt a huge, thrilling vitality fill him and he cried out the impossible names of unlikely gods! He cut at the harnesses that held the horses, he struck at the chains which pegged the marchers to their boards, and then he had mounted a great black warhorse which whinnied with the sheer pleasure of its release and, with Elric clinging to its mane, reared, striking at the air with its massive hoofs, then galloped towards the opening.

From somewhere now could be heard a new sound—human voices yelling with mindless panic—and Mother Phatt sobbed still louder. "It is too

late! It is too late!" Wheldrake took hold of one of the horses but it shook itself free and avoided him. He abandoned any further attempt to find himself a mount and instead ran in pursuit of the albino. Reaching the bottom of the staircase, Fallogard Phatt took hold of his mother's wheelchair while the old woman still opened her mouth in a wail of grieving terror. His niece covered her ears, running beside the chair.

Out into the night now—Elric a raging shadow ahead of them and the massive wheels of the ever-moving villages grinding inexorably forward—into a cold wind carrying rain—the wild night lit by the guttering fires and lamps of the walkers as they marched, of the distant villages of the first rank. There was a certain spring to the road now, which suggested they were approaching the bridge that spanned the bay.

Wheldrake heard snatches of song. He did not break his stride but forced himself to lengthen it, breathing expertly as he had once been taught. He heard laughter, casual conversation, and he wondered for a moment if this were merely a dream, with all the lack of consequence he associated with dreams. But there were other voices ahead—oaths and yells as Elric forced his horse between the walkers, hampered by so many bodies but refusing to use the runesword against this unarmed mass.

And behind him Mother Phatt grew quieter while her granddaughter's sobs grew louder.

Somehow Wheldrake and the Phatts were able to keep pace with Elric, even getting closer to him as he pushed on through the crowd and Mother Phatt cried "Stop! You must stop!" And all the folk of the Free Gypsy Nation who heard this obscenity upon an old woman's tongue drew away fastidiously, disgusted.

More confusion followed. Wheldrake began to wonder if they had not acted thoughtlessly, in response to a senile woman's nightmare. No wheel had stopped turning, no foot had ceased walking; everything was as it should be on the great road around the world. By the time they had made their way through the main mass and were able to move freely, Elric had slowed the horse to a canter, surprised not to be followed by the rest of Trollon's guard. Wheldrake, however, was prudent and waited until the albino had sheathed the great runesword before approaching him. "What did you see, Elric?"

"Only that the Rose was in danger. Perhaps something else. We must find Duntrollin swiftly. She was foolish to do what she did. I had thought her wiser than that. It was she, after all, who counseled us to caution!"

The wind blew harder and the flags of the Gypsy Nation cracked and snapped in the force of it.

"It will be dawn, soon," said Wheldrake. He turned to look back at the Family Phatt: three faces bearing the same stamp, of a fear so all-consuming it made them almost entirely blind to their surroundings. Imploring, wailing, shouting warnings, sobbing and shrieking, Mother Phatt led them in a hymn of unspeakable despair and pain. From which the free walkers discreetly

removed themselves, casting the occasional disapproving glance.

Calmly onward moves the Gypsy Nation, wheels turning with steady slowness, propelled by her marching millions, making her perpetual progress around the world …

Yet there is something *wrong*—something profoundly alarming ahead—something which Mother Phatt can already see, which Charion can already hear and which Fallogard Phatt yearns with all his soul to avert!

It is only as the dawn comes up behind them, soaring pinks, blues and faint golds, washing the road ahead with pale, watery light, that Elric understands why Mother Phatt screams and Charion holds her hands over her ears, and why Fallogard Phatt's face is a tormented mask!

The light races forward over the great span of the causeway, revealing the lumbering settlements, the tramping thousands, the smoke and the dimming lamps, the ordinary domestic details of the day—but ahead—ahead is what the clairvoyants have foreseen …

The mile-wide span across the bay, that astonishing creation of an obsessively nomadic people, has been cut as if by a gigantic sword—sheared in a single blow!

Now the two halves rise and fall slowly with the shock of this catastrophe. That massive bridge of human bones and animal skins, of every kind of compacted ordure, trembles like a cut branch, lifting and dropping almost imperceptibly, with steady beats, while on the landside the boiling waters release all their fury and the white spray makes rainbows high overhead.

One by one, with appalling deliberation, the villages of the Gypsy Nation crawl to the edge and plunge into the abyss.

To stop is obscene. They do not know how to stop. They can only die.

Elric, too, is screaming now, as he forces his horse forward. But he screams, he knows, at the apparent inevitability of human folly, of people who can destroy themselves to honour a principle and a habit that has long since ceased to have any practical function. They are dying because they would rather follow habit than alter their course.

As the villages crawl to the broken edge of the causeway and drop into oblivion, Elric thinks of Melniboné and his own race's refusals in the face of change. And he weeps for the Gypsy Nation, for Melniboné, and for himself.

They will not stop.

They cannot stop.

There is confusion. There is consternation. There is growing panic in the villages. But still they will not stop.

Through the falling mist rides Elric now, crying out for them to turn back. He rides almost to the edge of the causeway and his horse stamps and snorts in terror. The Gypsy Nation is dropping not into the distant ocean but into a great blossoming mass of reds and yellows, whose sides open like exotic petals and whose hot centre pulses as it swallows village after village.

And it is then that Elric knows this is Chaos work!

He turns the black stallion away from the edge and gallops back through that doomed press to where Mother Phatt in her chair shrieks: “No! No! The Rose! Where is the Rose?”

Elric dismounts and seizes Fallogard Phatt by his lean, trembling shoulders. “Where is she? Do you know? Which village is Duntrollin?” But Fallogard Phatt shakes his head, his mouth moving dumbly, until at last all he can do is repeat her name. “The Rose!”

“She should not have done this,” cries Charion. “It is wrong to do this!”

Even Elric could not condone what was happening, careless as he often was of human life, and he longed to call upon Chaos to bring a halt to the dreadful destruction. But Chaos had been summoned to perform this deed and he knew he would not be heeded. He had not believed the Rose capable of raising such formidable allies; he could scarcely accept that she would willingly permit such horror as thousands upon thousands of living creatures plunged into the abyss, their cries of terror now unified in the air, while overhead the white spray spumed and the rainbows glittered.

Then he had turned, hearing a familiar voice, and it was young Koropith Phatt, running towards them, his clothes in shreds and blood pouring from a score of minor cuts.

“Oh, what has she done!” cried Wheldrake. “The woman is a monster!”

But Koropith was panting, pointing backwards to where, as bloody and ragged as himself, her hair slick with sweat, her sword Swift Thorn in her right hand, her dagger Little Thorn in her left, staggered the Rose, with tears like diamonds upon her haggard face.

Wheldrake addressed her first. He, too, was crying. “Why did you do this? Nothing can justify such murder!”

She looked at him in exhausted puzzlement before his words made sense to her. Then she turned her back on him, sheathing her weapons. “You wrong me, sir. This is Chaos work. It could only be Chaos work. Prince Gaynor has an ally. He wreaks great sorcery. Greater than I could have guessed. It seems he does not care who or what or how many he kills in his desperate search for death …”

“Gaynor did this?” Wheldrake reached out to take her arm, but she resisted him. “Where is he now?”

“Where he believes I will not follow,” she said. “But follow I must.” There was an air of weary determination about the woman and Elric saw that Koropith Phatt, far from blaming her for his ordeal, had placed his hand in hers and was comforting her.

“We shall find him again, lady,” said the child. He began to lead her back the way they had come.

But Fallogard Phatt intercepted them. “Is Duntrollin destroyed?”

The Rose shrugged. “No doubt.”

“And the sisters?” Wheldrake wished to know. “Did Gaynor find them?”

“He found them. As did we—thanks to Koropith and his clairvoyance. But Gaynor—Gaynor had possession of them in some way. We fought. He had already summoned aid from Chaos. He had doubtless planned everything in detail. He had waited until the Nation was approaching the bridge …”

“He has escaped? To where?” Elric already guessed some of the answer and she confirmed what he suspected.

She made a motion with her thumb towards the edge. “Down there,” she said.

“He found his death then, after all.” Wheldrake frowned. “But he wished to have as much company as possible, it seems, on his journey to oblivion.”

“Who can say where he journeys?” The Rose had turned and was going slowly back towards the edge where now a village perched, half-toppled, her inhabitants wailing and scrambling, yet making no real attempt to escape. Then the whole thing had gone, tumbling down into that flaring manifestation of Chaos, to be swallowed, to be engulfed. “I would guess that only he knows that.”

Leading his horse, Elric followed her. Her hand was still in Koropith’s. Elric heard the boy say: “They are still there, lady. All of them. I can find them, lady. I can follow. Come.” The boy was leading her now, leading her to the very lip of the broken causeway, to stand staring into the abyss.

“We shall find a way for you, lady,” Fallogard Phatt promised, in sudden fear. “You cannot—”

But he was too late, for without warning both the woman and the boy had flung themselves into space, out over the pulsing, glowing maw that seemed so hungry, so eager for the souls which fell by their hundreds and thousands down. Down into the very stuff of Chaos!

Mother Phatt screamed again. It was one long, agonized scream that no longer mourned the general destruction. This time she voiced a thoroughly personal grief.

Elric ran to the edge, saw the two figures falling, dwindling, to be swiftly absorbed by the foul beauty of that voracious fundament.

Impressed by a courage, a desperation which seemed to him even greater than his own, he stepped backwards, speechless with astonishment—

—and was too late to anticipate Fallogard Phatt’s single bellow of agonized outrage as the man pushed his mother to the lip of the broken causeway, hesitated for only a split second, then, with his niece clinging to his coat-tails, plunged after his disappearing child. Three more figures spun down through those pulsing, hungry colours, into the flames of Chaos.

Sickened, confused and attempting to control a fear he had never

known before, Elric drew Stormbringer from its scabbard.

Wheldrake came to stand beside him. “She is gone, Elric. They are all gone. There is nothing you can fight here.”

Elric nodded slowly in agreement. He stretched the blade before him then brought it up flat against his heaving chest, placing his other hand near the tip of the great broadsword on which runes flickered and glowed. “I have no choice,” he said. “I would endure any danger rather than earn the fate my father has promised me …”

And with that he had screamed the name of his own patron Duke of Demons and had hurled his howling battle-blade, and his body with it, out over the Chaos pit, a wild, unlikely song upon his bloodless lips …

The last thing Wheldrake saw of his friend were crimson eyes glaring with a kind of terrible tranquility as the Sorcerer Emperor was pulled remorselessly down into the flaming hub of that hellish abyss …

BOOK TWO

ESBERN SNARE; THE NORTHERN WEREWOLF

Of the Troll of the Church they sing the rune
By the Northern Sea in the harvest moon;
And the fishers of Zealand hear him still
Scolding his wife in Ulshoi hill.
And seaward over its groves of birch
Still looks the tower of Kallundborg church,
Where, first at its altar, a wedded pair,
Stood Helva of Nesvek and Esbern Snare!
—Wheldrake,
Norwegian Songs

CHAPTER ONE

Consequences of Ill-Considered Dealings with the Supernatural; Something of the Discomforts of Unholy Compacts.

ELRIC FELL THROUGH centuries of anguish, millennia of mortal misery and folly; he roared his defiance as he fell, his sword like a beacon and a challenge in his grip, down towards the luscious heart of Chaos while everywhere around him was confusion and cacophony, swift images of faces, cities, whole worlds, transmogrified and insane, warping and reshaping; for in unchecked Chaos everything was in perpetual change.

He was alone.

Very suddenly everything was still. His feet touched stable ground, though it was little more than a slab of rock floating in the flaming light of the quasi-infinite—universe upon universe blending one into the other, each ripple a different colour in a different spectrum, each facet a separate reality. It was as if he stood at the centre of a crystal of unimaginable complexity and his eyes, refusing the sights they were offered, somehow became blind to everything but the intense, shifting light, whose colours he could not identify, whose odours were full of hints of the familiar, whose voices offered every terror, every consolation and yet were not mortal. Which set the albino prince to sobbing, conquered and helpless as his strength drained from him, and his sword grew heavy in his hand, an ordinary piece of iron, and a soft, humorous song sounded from somewhere beyond the fires, becoming words:

"Thou hast such courage, sweetest of my slaves! Impetuous Champion of the Ever-Changing, where is thy father's soul?"

"I know not, Lord Arioch." Elric felt his own soul freeze on the very point of extermination, the imminent obliteration of everything he had ever been or would be—less than a memory. And Arioch knew he did not lie. He took away the chill. And Elric was soothed again …

He had never before experienced such a sense of impatience in his patron Lord of Hell. What emergency alarmed the gods?, he wondered.

"Mortal morsel, thou art my darling and my dear one, pretty little sweetmeat …"

Elric, familiar with the cadences of his patron's moods, was both fascinated and afraid. Much that was in him wished for the approval of his patron at all costs. Much wished only to give itself up forever to the mercies of Duke Arioch, whatever they might be, to suffer whatever agonies his lord decided, such was the power of that godling's presence, embracing him and coaxing him and praising him and blessed always with the absolute power of life or death over his eternal soul. Yet still, in the most profoundly secret part of his mind Elric kept a resolution to himself, that one day he would rid his world of gods entirely—should his life not be snuffed away the next second (such was his patron's present mood). Here, in his own true element, Arioch

had his full power and any pact he had ever made with a mortal was meaningless; this was his own Dukedom and here he required no allies, honoured no bargains and demanded instant compliance of all his slaves, mortal and supernatural, on pain of instant extinction.

"Speak, sweetmeat. What brought thee to my domain?"

"Mere chance, I think, Lord Arioch. I fell …"

"Ah, fell!" The word held considerable meaning, considerable understanding. "You *fell*."

"Into an abyss which only a Lord of the Higher Worlds could sink between the realms."

"Yes. You fell. IT WAS MASHABAK!"

Elric knew mindless relief that the rage was directed away from him. And he, too, understood what had occurred—that Gaynor the Damned had served Arioch's arch rival, Count Mashabak of Chaos …

"You had servants in the Gypsy Nation, lord?"

"It was mine, that near-limbo. A useful device that many sought to control. And because he could not possess it for himself, Mashabak destroyed it …"

"Upon a whim, lord?"

"Oh, he served some creature's petty ends, I believe …"

"It was Gaynor, lord."

"Ah, Gaynor. He has become a politician, eh?"

Elric grew aware of his patron's brooding silence. After what might have been a year, the Duke of Hell murmured, with better humour, "Very well, sweetmeat, go upon thy way. But recollect that thou art mine and thy father's soul is mine. Both are mine. Both must be delivered up to me, for that is our ancient compact."

"Go where, patron?"

"Why, to Ulshinir, of course, where the three sisters have escaped their captor. And could be returning home."

"To Ulshinir, my lord?"

"Fear not, thou shalt travel like a gentleman. I shall send thy slave after thee." The Lord of the Higher Worlds had his attention upon other affairs now. It was not in the nature of a Duke of Chaos to dwell too long upon one matter, unless it was of monumental importance.

The fires went out.

Elric still stood upon that spur of rock, but now it was attached to a substantial hill, from which he could look down into a rugged valley, full of sparse grass and limestone crags across which a thin powder of snow blew. The air was cold and sharp and good to his senses and, though he was cold, he brushed vigorously at his naked arms and face as if to rid them of the grime of hell. At his feet something murmured. He looked down to see the runesword where he had dropped it during his audience with Arioch. He wondered at the power of his patron, that even Stormbringer felt compelled to acknowledge.

He raised the blade almost lovingly, cradling it like a child. “We have need of each other still, thee and I.”

The blade was sheathed, the terrain inspected again, and he thought he saw a thread of smoke rising over the next hill. From there he might begin his search for Ulshinir.

He thanked chance that he had drawn on his boots before rushing in pursuit of the Rose, for he needed them now, against the jagged stones and treacherous turf down which he made his way. The cold was resisted with the expediency of dragon venom, again painfully absorbed, and in less than an hour he was striding down a narrow path to a stone cottage, thatched with peat and straw, which gave off the smell of earth, warmth and a wholesome fecundity, and was the first of several such dwellings, all as comfortably settled into the landscape as if they had grown naturally from it.

In answer to Elric’s polite knock upon the gnarled oak door, a fair-skinned young woman opened it and smiled at him uncertainly, eyeing his appearance with a curiosity she attempted to disguise. She blushed as she

pointed along the road to Ulshinir and told him it was less than three hours' easy walking from there, to the sea.

Gentle hills and shallow dales, a white limestone road through the mellow greens, coppers and purples of the grasses and heathers; Elric was glad to be walking. He wished to clear his head, to consider Arioch's demands, to wonder how Gaynor had come to lose the mysterious three sisters. And he wondered what he must find in Ulshinir.

And he wondered if the Rose still lived.

Indeed, he thought with some surprise, he cared if the Rose still lived. He was curious, he assured himself, to hear more of her story.

Ulshinir was a harbour town of steep-roofed houses and narrow spires, all with a scattering of early snow. The smell of woodsmoke, drifting through the autumnal air, somehow consoled him a little.

Within his belt he still had tucked a few gold coins which Moonglum had long ago insisted he carry and he hoped that gold was acceptable currency in Ulshinir. The town certainly seemed of familiar appearance, very much like any town of the Northern Young Kingdoms, and he guessed this plane was close to his own part of the Sphere, at least, and possibly the realm. And this, too, gave him a little comfort. The few citizens he encountered upon the cobbled streets found his appearance strange, but they were friendly enough and were happy to point the way to the inn. The inn was spare, in the manner of such places in his own world, but warm and clean. He was glad of the nutty, full-bodied ale they brought him, of the broth and the pie. He paid for his bed in advance and, while his landlady was counting out considerable change in silver, he asked if she had heard of other visitors to the town—three sisters, in fact.

"Dark haired, pale beauties, with such wonderful eyes—not unlike your own in shape, sir, though theirs were of such a dense blue as to be almost black. And exquisite clothes and traps! There's not a woman in Ulshinir who did not turn out to get a glimpse of them. They took ship yesterday and their destination is the subject of considerable dispute amongst us, as you can imagine." She smiled tolerantly at her own weakness. "Legend says they're people from beyond our Heavy Sea. Were you a friend, perhaps? Or a relative?"

"They have a small thing that belonged to my father, that's all," said Elric casually. "They inadvertently took it with them. I doubt they know they have it! They had a boat, you say?"

"From the harbour yonder." She pointed through the window to the grey water enclosed by two long quays, each terminated by a tall lighthouse. There were only fishing boats moored there now. "The *Onna Peerthon*, she was. She calls here regularly with a cargo of haberdashery and needle-goods, usually, from Shamfird. Captain Gnarreh normally refuses passengers, but the sisters offered him a price, we heard, that he would have been a fool to refuse. But as to their destination …"

"Captain Gnarreh will return?"

"Next year, almost certainly."

"And what lies beyond your shores, lady?"

She shook her head and laughed as if she had never heard such a joke before. "First the island reefs and then the Heavy Sea. Should anything exist on the other side of the Heavy Sea—should it have a far side, indeed—then we have no knowledge of it. You are very ignorant, sir, if I may say so."

"You might say so, madam, and I apologize to you. I have been lately under some little enchantment and my mind is clouded."

"Then you should rest, sir, not be journeying towards the very edge of the world!"

"Which island might they have wished to visit?"

"Any one of a score, sir, would be my guess. If you like, I can find you an old map we have."

Gratefully Elric accepted her offer and took the map up to his room, poring over it in the hope that perhaps some instinct would direct his attention to the appropriate island. After half-an-hour of this, he was no wiser and was about to prepare for bed when he heard a sound below, a raised voice, that he thought he recognized.

It was with lifting heart that Elric, who had thought he would never see the man again, ran to the top of the stairs and looked down into the inn's main hall where a small red-headed poet, in frock-coat and trousers, waistcoat and cravat which looked as if they had come rather too close to a fire, declaimed some ode he hoped would buy him a bed—or at least a bowl of soup—for the night. "*Gold was the colour Gwyneth gave to Gwinefyr. And coral for cheeks, eyes blue as the sea. And bearing so perfect, so gracious, so fine. And lips red as Burgundy grapes, lush on the vine. These were the gifts she gave unto her tragic Queen. Her Queen of Caprice, by Tragedy Redeem'd*. Great Scott, sir! I thought you gone to perdition a year or more ago! It's good to see you, sir. You can help me with your Memoriam. I had so few particulars. I am afraid you will not like it. If I remember, it is not your preferred style. It tends, I will admit, to the Heroic. And the *ballade* form is considered merely quaint by many." He began to search his pockets for his manuscript. "It has gone, I fear, the way of the *triolet*. Or, indeed, the *rondel —'Lord Elric left his homeland weeping, For his dear young bride whom he loved of yore. We see him stand by the open door. While the sweet tears down her cheeks are creeping.*'—an attempt, dear friend, I must admit, to catch the popular taste. Such trifles have great general appeal and your subject, sir, I felt might attract public fancy. I had hoped to immortalize you, while at the same time—Aha! No, that is upon a Hugnit I met last week—and you will say that the *rondel* is inappropriate to epic form—but one has to *dress up* one's epics, these days—sweeten them in some way. And a few innocuous cadences do a great deal to achieve that end. I have no money, you see, sir …"

And the poor little fellow looked suddenly wan. He sat himself down

upon a bench, his shoulders slumped, even his shock of red hair limp upon his avian head, his fingers screwing up miscellaneous pieces of paper in some unconscious pantomime of self-disgust.

"Why, then, I must commission a work from you," said Elric descending. He put a sympathetic hand upon his friend's shoulder. "After all, did you not tell me once that patronage of the artist was the only valuable vocation to which a prince might aspire?"

At which Wheldrake grinned, cheered by this confirmation of a friendship he believed gone for ever. "It has not been easy for me, sir, just lately, I must admit." There was a wealth of recent horror in the poet's eyes and Elric did not tax him on it. He knew himself that all Wheldrake wished to do at present was rid his mind of the memories. The poet had a momentary recollection and smoothed out the last piece of paper he had crumpled. "Yes, the *Ballade Memoriam*, I recall—I suppose it is a somewhat limited form. But for parody, sir—unexcelled! *A warrior rode death's lonely road, No lonelier road rode he …*" Again this brief revival of his old spark failed to ignite, as it were, the flashpan of his soul. "I am rather wanting, sir, I think, of food and drink. This is the first human settlement I have seen in several months."

And then Elric had the pleasure of ordering food and ale for his friend and watching him come slowly back to something like his old self. "Say what you will, sir, no poet ever did his best work starving, though he may have starved himself whilst doing the work, that I'll grant. They are different things, however." And he sat back from the bench, adjusting his bony bottom upon the boards, and belched discreetly before letting out a great sigh, as if only now could he afford to allow himself to believe that his fortunes had changed. "I am mighty glad to see you, Prince Elric. And glad, too, of your aristocratic conscience. I hope, however, you'll allow me to discuss the technicalities of the commission in the morning. As I remember, sir, you have only a passing interest in the profession of versification—questions of metre, rhyme—Licence, Poetic Combination, Mixed Metre—Orthometry in general —do not concern you."

"I'll take your advice on all of that, my friend." Elric wondered at his affection for the little man, his admiration for that strange, clever mind so thoroughly lost to its proper context that it must be for ever grasping at the only constancies it had, those of the poetic craft. "And there is no haste. I would be glad of your company on a voyage I expect to be undertaking. As soon as a likely ship is free. Failing that, I might be forced to employ a little sorcery …"

"As a last resort, sir, I beg you. I've rather had my fill of wizardry and wild romance for the moment." Master Wheldrake took a conclusive pull upon his ale-pot. "But I seem to recall such stuff is as familiar to you, Prince Elric, as the Peckham Omnibus is to me, and I would rather link my fortune with one like yourself, who has at least some understanding of Chaos and her whimsical eruptions. So I shall be glad to accept both commission and

companionship. I am mighty glad to see you again, sir." And with that he fell upon his own arm, snoring.

Then the albino prince took the little poet up and carried him, as if he were a child, to his room before returning to his own bed and his contemplation of the map—the islands of the great reef and, beyond it, darkness, an impossible ocean, unnavigable and unnatural, the Heavy Sea. Reconciled to hiring some fishing boat to visit the islands one by one, he fell into a deep sleep and was awakened by a scratching at his door and the bellow of some maid informing him that it was past the one thousand and fifteenth hour (their largest division of yearly time in Ulshinir) and there would be no breakfast for him if he did not rise at once.

He did not care for breakfast, but he was anxious to confer with Wheldrake on the subject of the three sisters and was somewhat surprised, once he had prepared himself for the day, to discover the poet declaiming on the very subject—or so it seemed …

"Lord Soulis is a keen wizard,
A wizard mickle of lear:
Who cometh in bond of Lord Soulis,
Thereof he hath little cheer.
"He hath three braw castles to his hand,
That wizard mickle of age;
The first of Estness, the last of Westness,
The middle of Hermitage.
"He has three fair mays into his hand,
The least is good to see;
The first is Annet, the second is Janet,
The third is Marjorie.
"The firsten o' them has a gowden crown,
The neist has a gowden ring;
The third has sma'gowd her about,
She has a sweeter thing.
"The firsten o' them has a rose her on,
The neist has a marigold;
The third of them has a better flower,
The best that springeth ower wold."

The inn's female servant, the landlady and her daughter, listened enraptured to Wheldrake's sing-song rendering. But it was the words that captured Elric's imagination …

"Good morning, Master Wheldrake. Is that a dialect of your own land?"

"It is, sir." Wheldrake kissed the hands of the ladies and strutted with all his old vigour across the room to greet his friend. "A border ballad, I believe, or something made very like one …"

"You did not write it?"

"I cannot answer you honestly, Prince Elric." Wheldrake sat down on the bench opposite the albino and watched him sip a dish of stewed herbs. "Have some honey in that." He pushed the pot forward. "It makes it palatable. There are some things I do not know if I wrote, if I heard, if I copied from another poet—though I doubt there's any can match Wheldrake's command of the poetic arts (I do not claim genius—but mere craft)—for I am prolific, you see. It is my nature, and perhaps my doom. Had I died after my first volume or two I should even now reside in Westminster Abbey."

Not wishing a lengthy and impossible-to-follow explanation on the nature of this particular Valhalla, Elric, as had become his habit, merely let the unfamiliar words roll by.

"But this Lord Soulis. Who is he?"

"A mere invention, for all I know, sir. I was reminded of the ballad by the three ladies here, but, of course, perhaps our three elusive sisters struck a memory, too. Certainly, if I remember further verses I'll speak up. But I believe it no more than a coincidence, Prince Elric. The multiverse is full of specific numbers of power and so on, and three is particularly popular with poets since three names are always excellent means of ringing changes on something long—which, of course, is the nature of narrative verse. Again, this slides from favour wherever I go. The artist is beyond fashion, but his purse, sir, is not. That's an odd ship, isn't it, sir, come into the harbour overnight?"

Elric had seen no ship. He put down his bowl and let Wheldrake lead him to the window where the landlady and her daughter still leaned, staring at a craft whose hull gleamed black and yellow and whose prow bore the marks of Chaos, while from her mast there flew a red-and-black flag centred with a sign in some unlikely alphabet. On her forecastle, weighting the ship oddly so that she was stern-light in the water and showing too much of her rudder, was a tall, square object swathed in black canvas and filling almost the whole deck. Occasionally the thing moved in a sudden convulsion and then was still again. There was no clue to what the canvas hid. But, as Elric watched, a figure strolled from the cabin under the forward deck, stood for a second on the polished planks and seemed to look directly at him. Elric could scarcely return the gaze, since the helmet had no eyes he could make out. It was Gaynor the Damned and the standard he flew was, Elric now recollected, that of Count Mashabak. They were fully rivals, it seemed, serving warring patrons.

Gaynor returned to his cabin and next a plank was lowered from the moored galley and laid onto the mole. The ship's hands moved with lithe speed, almost like monkeys, to secure the gangplank as there stepped onto it a lad of no more than fifteen, clad in all the vivid, pretty finery of a pirate lord, a cutlass in one side of his sash, a sabre in the other, to stride up towards the town with the confident swagger of a conqueror.

It was only as the figure drew close to the inn that Elric recognized who it was—and he wondered again at the turning Spheres of the multiverse,

marveled at the extraordinary combinations of events and worlds, both in and out of the dimensions of time, that were possible within the undiscoverable parameters of the quasi-infinite.

While, at the same moment something within him warned him that what he saw might be an illusion or worse: it could be someone whom illusion had consumed, who had given themselves up wholly to Chaos and was nothing more than Gaynor's marionette.

Yet, by her walk and the way she had of looking about her, alert and cheerful as she seemed, Elric could hardly believe she was unwillingly in Gaynor's service.

He left the window and went to greet her as the door was opened by Ernest Wheldrake, whose bright blue eyes went wide as he piped, with joyful surprise:

"Why, Charion Phatt, disguised as a boy! I am in love! You have grown up!"

CHAPTER TWO

In Which Old Acquaintanceships Are Resumed and New Agreements Reached.

Charion Phatt had reached womanhood since their last meeting and there was something about her which suggested her air of confidence was founded on faith in herself, rather than any artificial bravado. She was only a little surprised to see Wheldrake and even as she grinned a greeting at him her eyes searched inside the inn and found Elric.

"I bring an invitation from the ship's master for you—for you gentlemen—to join him this evening," she murmured.

"How long have you been in Prince Gaynor's service, Mistress Phatt?" asked Elric, with proper care to keep his tone neutral.

"Long enough, Prince Elric—more or less since I last saw you—that dawn on the gypsy bridge …"

"And your family?"

She smoothed chestnut hair against the lace and silk of her shirt. Her lids for a second hid her eyes. "They, sir? Why, I'm in alliance with Prince Gaynor on account of them. We are seeking them and have been seeking them since that great destruction."

And briefly she explained how Gaynor had found her imprisoned as a witch in a distant realm and had told her that he, too, sought her uncle and grandmother, since they alone, he believed, could tread with any certainty the pathways between the dimensions and lead him to the three sisters.

"You are certain they survived?" asked Wheldrake gently.

"Uncle and Grandmama, at least," she said, "of those I'm certain. And I think little Koropith is further off—or veiled from me, perhaps. I'd guess something of him continues to exist—somewhere …" Then she took her leave of them and walked on into the town to buy, she said, a few luxuries.

"I am truly, truly in love," Wheldrake confided to his friend, who refrained from suggesting that there was a certain unsuitability in their ages. Wheldrake was approaching fifty, he would guess, and the young woman was not much more than eighteen.

"Such differences as exist between us mean nothing when two hearts beat in harmony," said Wheldrake rapturously, and it was not certain if he quoted himself or some admired peer.

Elric fell silent, ignoring his friend's effusions, and wondering at the ways of the multiverse, this environment which, as a sorcerer, he had until then only understood in terms of symbols.

He considers the symbol of the Balance, of that equilibrium which once all philosophers strove to achieve, until, by expediency or by threats to their lives and souls, they began to strike bargains, some with Law but mostly with Chaos, which is an element closer to the natures of most sorcerers. And

so they ensured that they could never reach the goal for which they had been trained: For which some of them had been born: For which a few of them were fated. These last were the ones who understood the great perversion which had taken place, who understood all that they had given up.

Gaynor, ex-Prince of the Universal, understood better than any other, for he had known perfection and lost it.

It is at this moment, as he closes the door to an ordinary inn, that Elric realizes his terror has turned to something else, a kind of determination. A kind of cold insanity. He gambles not only upon his own soul's fate, not only upon his father's—but far more. Rather than continue to be baffled by events, controlled by them, he makes up his mind to enter the game between the gods, and play it to the full, play it for himself and his mortal friends, the remaining creatures that he loves—for Tanelorn. This is no more than a promise he makes within himself, as yet scarcely coherent—but it will become the foundation of his future actions, this refusal to accept the Tyranny of Fate, to let his destiny be moved by every whim of some half-bestial divinity, whose only right over him is due to the superior power he wields. It is a reality his father accepted, even as he played the game, subtly and carefully, with his life and soul as the main stake—it is a reality, however, that Elric is beginning to refuse …

There is in him, too, another kind of coldness, the coldness of anger at any creature that can casually have so many of its fellows slain. It is an anger not only directed at Gaynor, but at himself. Perhaps that is why he fears Gaynor so much, because they are almost the same creature. If some philosophies were to be believed, they could indeed be aspects of a single creature. Deep memories stir in him but are unwelcome. He drives them down to where they lurk again, like the beasts of some impossible deep, terrifying all that encounter them, but themselves terrified by the light …

That other part of Elric, the part that is all Melnibonéan, chides him for a fool, wasting time with useless niceties of conscience and suggests that an alliance with Gaynor might give them, together, the power he desires to challenge—and perhaps even vanquish.

Or, even a temporary truce between the two would gain him, perhaps, his immediate needs—though what then? What would take place when Arioch demanded everything he had enjoined Elric to find? Could a Duke of Hell be tricked, even defeated, banished from a certain plane, by a mortal?

Elric realizes that these are the ideas which brought his father to his present dilemma and, with a sardonic smile, he settles back behind his bench to enjoy his interrupted breakfast.

He will decide nothing until this evening, when he dines aboard Gaynor's ship.

Wheldrake looks once more after the departing beauty, takes parchment from one pocket, pen from another, a traveling inkwell from his top left waistcoat pocket, and begins first a sestina, *next a* roundelay, *then a*

villanelle, *until settling again upon the* sestina …

This was the measure of my soul's delight;
It had no power of joy to fly by day,
Nor part in the large lordship of the light;
But in a secret moon-beholden way
Had all its will of dreams and pleasant night,
And all the love and life that sleepers may.

Whereupon the Prince of Ruins slips away, back to his maps and his particular problems, as Wheldrake pauses, sighs, and makes a stab this time at a sonnet …

"Or I had thought, perhaps, after all, an Ode. Along the lines, perhaps, of something I wrote in Putney.

"Golden eastern waters rocked the cradle where she slept
Songless, crowned with bays to be of sovereign song,
Breathed upon with balm and calm of bounteous seas that kept
Secret all the blessing of her birthright, strong,
Soft, severe, and sweet as dawn when first it laughed and leapt
Forth of heaven, and clove the clouds that wrought it wrong!

"Good evening, Prince Gaynor. I trust you have an explanation for your destruction of a nation? Your sophistries should, at least, be entertaining." The little poet looked up at the mysterious helm, his knuckles upon his hips, his beak flaring with disdain, unmoved by fear of Gaynor's power, nor of any social stricture to hold his tongue on the subject of his host's genocide as he stepped aboard the ship.

Elric, for his part, said little, keeping a distance between himself and the others, which he had once been taught to do as a matter of course, as a Melnibonéan princeling. This coolness was new to Wheldrake but would have been very familiar to Moonglum, were he here and not, perhaps, still in Tanelorn. Elric adopted the manner when circumstances led him once more towards a kind of cynicism, that cynicism oddly tinged with other qualities, harder to judge or to define. The long-fingered bone-white hand hung upon the pommel of the massive runesword and the head was set at a certain angle, as if further withdrawn, while the brooding crimson eyes held a humour which, on occasions, even the Lords of the Higher Worlds had considered dangerous. Yet he bowed. He made a movement with his free hand. He looked steadily into the eyes behind the helm, the eyes that smoked and glittered and writhed with the fires of hell.

"Good evening, Prince Gaynor." There was at once a softness and a steely sharpness to Elric's voice which reminded Wheldrake of a cat's claws sheathed in downy fur.

The ex-Prince of the Balance cocked his head a little to one side, perhaps in irony, and spoke with that musical voice which had served Chaos as a lure for so many centuries. "I am glad to see you, Master Wheldrake. I have only recently learned we should experience the privilege of your

company. Though I was told by mutual friends that you, Elric, could be found in Ulshinir." He shrugged away the question. "We have, whatever you may call it, some kind of fresh luck forming, it seems. Or are we mere ingredients? Eggs in some mad god's omelette? My chef is excellent, by the way. Or so I'm told."

Then here came Mistress Charion Phatt, in black and white velvet and lace, her youthful beauty shining like a jewel from its box.

Half-swooning, Master Wheldrake made his elaborate courtesies, which she received with amused good will and drew him to her as they strolled towards the forward cabin where the looming shadow of that peculiar cargo rocked and shifted on the roof above and which Prince Gaynor and Charion Phatt both ignored as if they heard or saw nothing out of place.

Then came the dining. Elric, who frequently cared nothing for the refinements of appetite, found the food as delicious as Gaynor had promised. The damned prince told a tale of a voyage to Aramandy and the Mallow Country there to find Xermenif Blüche, the Master Chef of Volofar. And they might have been dining again amongst the wealthy intelligentsia of Trollon, heedless of any unusual circumstances—of warring gods, of stolen souls and lost clairvoyants and so on—and commenting on the delicacy of the mousse.

Prince Gaynor, in a carved black chair at the head of his table, which was swathed with a dark scarlet cloth, turned an enigmatic helm towards Elric and said that he had always preserved certain standards, even when in battle or in command of semi-brutes, as one so frequently was, these days. One had after all, he added in some amusement, to control what one could, especially since one's fate grew so unmalleable as the Conjunction approached.

Elric had heard little of this and he moved impatiently in his seat, pushing away the plates and cutlery. "Will you tell us, Prince Gaynor, why you make us your guests here?"

"*If you will tell me, Elric, why you fear me!*" said Gaynor in a sudden whisper, the cold of limbo slicing into Elric's soul.

But Elric held his psychic ground, conscious of Gaynor's testing him.

"I fear you because you are prepared to go to any ends to achieve your own death. And since life has no value to you, you are to be feared as all such animals are feared. For you desire power only for that most selfish of all ends, and therefore you know no boundaries in the seeking and the gaining of it. That is why I fear you, Gaynor the Damned. And that is why you *are* damned."

The faceless creature flung back its steel-shod head, the colours behind the metal quivering and flaring, and laughed at this. "I fear you, Elric, because you are damned yet continue to behave as if you were not …"

"I have made no bargains such as yours, prince."

"Your whole race has made a bargain! And now it is paying the price —somewhere, not far from here, in a realm you will call home, the last of your people are being marshaled to march in the armies of Chaos. The time

for that last great fight is not yet. But we are preparing for it. Would you survive it, Elric? Or would you be blasted to non-existence, not even your memory remaining—less enduring, say, than one of Master Wheldrake's verses—"

"I say, sir! You have already proved yourself an unmitigated villain! Pray, remember at least that you are a gentleman!" Then Wheldrake's eye returned to his beloved.

"Can you bear the prospect of everlasting death, Elric? You, who love life as much as I hate it. We could both have our deepest desire …"

"I think you fear me, Prince Gaynor, because I refuse that final compromise," said Elric. "I fear you because you belong wholly to Chaos. But you fear me because I do not."

A querulous noise issued from within the helm, almost like the snuffling of some cosmic pig. Then in came three sailors with a tambourine, a pipe and a musical sword, to play some mournful shanty, and who were swiftly dismissed by Gaynor, to the relief of all.

"Very well, sir," said Gaynor, all his equilibrium recovered, it seemed. "Then can I put a modest suggestion to you?"

"If you wish to join forces to seek the three sisters, I will consider your proposals," said Elric. "Otherwise I see little left to discuss between us."

"But that is just what I would discuss, Elric. We all desire something different, I suspect, of those sisters, and the reason why so much upheaval flings us this way and that through the multiverse is because there are several interests and several Lords of the Higher Worlds involved. You accept that, gentlemen?" Now he included Wheldrake. Charion Phatt sat back in her chair, evidently already privy to her ally's plan.

They nodded their agreement.

"In some ways we are all at odds," Gaynor continued, "but in others we have no battle between us. And I see you agree. Well, then, so let us search for the sisters, as well as the Family Phatt—or what remains of it—together. At least until such time as our interests are no longer the same."

And thus did Elric of Melniboné and Master Ernest Wheldrake accept the logic of the damned prince's compromise and agreed to sail with him when his ship left harbour the next morning, as soon as they had selected another sailor or two from the braver or more desperate seadogs of Ulshinir.

"But," said Elric, as they made to return ashore, while a scuffling and shifting went on, together with the occasional light pounding, overhead, "you have not yet discussed your destination, Prince Gaynor. Do we trust you in that or will you tell us the name of the island the three sisters have reached?"

"Island?" Gaynor's helm grew dark, almost in puzzlement, and blues and blacks swirled across its smooth, sometimes opaque, surface. "Island, sir? We do not go to any island."

"Then where are the three sisters?"

"Where *we* journey, sir, though they are lost to any immediate meeting

between us, I fear."

"And where," said Wheldrake with a certain justified impatience, "do *we* journey, sir?"

Again the helm tilted a little as if in amusement and the musical voice sounded the words with considerable relish:

"Why, sir, I thought you'd guessed. Tomorrow we set sail into the Heavy Sea."

CHAPTER THREE

Unusual Methods of Sea Travel; Disappointments of Piracy. A Hellblade Misplaced.

It was not until Ulshinir was well below the horizon and the reefs still invisible ahead that Gaynor the Damned gave the order to "let some light on the poor toad" and the sailors obeyed with perhaps a touch of reluctance, drawing off and rolling up the black canvas to reveal the iron bars of a large cage from which, blinking, appeared two enormous green-lidded eyes set in a gnarled reptilian head whose nostrils flared and whose long scarlet mouth opened to reveal a pink, flickering tongue, while the extraordinarily dense weight of scaly flesh was supported on massive webbed feet, limbs as thick as elm-trunks, the whole thing shuddering and rippling with the effort of its breathing.

The eyes, like dark, semi-precious stones, sought Gaynor and fixed on him where he stood below, looking up at the cage. The red, spongy lips opened and closed and deep, groaning sounds issued from the monster. It was only after a moment of listening that Elric realized the reptile was speaking.

"*I am discontented, master. I am hungry.*"

"Soon you will be allowed to feed, my pretty one. Very soon." Gaynor chuckled as he climbed the companionway and gripped the bars of the cage with his gauntleted hands and peered at the gigantic toad which was five times his size and weight, at least.

Wheldrake had no wish, himself, to get closer. He hung back as Charion Phatt, laughing at his hesitation, went to the toad which responded to her cluckings and cooings with more grumblings and shufflings.

"It's a self-pitying creature," said Elric, staring at the thing with a

certain sympathy. “Where did you find it? Is it a gift of Count Mashabak’s, something even Chaos will not suffer?”

“Khorghakh is a native of a nearby realm, Prince Elric.” Gaynor was amused. “He will help us to cross the Heavy Sea.”

“And what lies beyond?” Elric asked, watching as Charion Phatt took her sword and scratched the toad’s belly, making him grunt with a certain pleasure and seem to relax a little, though he still insisted he was hungry.

“Khorghakh is a denizen of the Heavy Sea?”

“Not exactly,” said Gaynor, “a denizen. But he is familiar with that singular ocean, or so I have been reassured. After three years of seeking him I acquired Khorghakh from some adventurers we encountered. They were coasting the islands looking for Ulshinir …”

“Looking for you,” said Charion. “I knew you were here. It was only later that I sensed the presence of the three sisters. I had thought they were following you. Yet you sensed them, also. I did not know you were clairvoyant.”

“I am not,” said Elric. “At least, not in the way you imply. I had no choice in my destination. For you, as I can see, some years have passed. For me, very little has occurred since the moment I followed you all into the Chaos pit. Wheldrake has had at least a year of wandering. It suggests that even if we should find the three sisters or, indeed, your family, they could be children or wizened oldsters by the time we reach them.”

“I like not this randomness at all,” says Wheldrake. “Chaos was never to my taste, though my critics did not believe that. I was raised to accept that there were certain universal laws obeyed by all. To discover that this hyper-reality has only a few fundamental rules which, on occasions, may also be changed, is disturbing to me.”

“It disturbed my uncle, also,” said Charion. “It was why he elected to lead a life of quiet domesticity. Of course, he was not allowed that choice, after all. He lost my mother, his brother and his wife to the machinations of Chaos. For my part, I have accepted the inevitable. I am aware that I live in the multiverse which, though it follows certain courses and measures, though, as I have been told, it obeys a great and inviolable logic, is so vast, so variable, so varied, that it appears to be ruled by Chance alone. So I will accept that my life is subject not to the consistency offered by Law but the uncertainty promised by Chaos.”

“A pessimistic view, sweet lady.” Wheldrake restrained his own feelings on the matter. “Is it not better to live as if there were some abiding logic to our existence?”

“Make no mistake, Master Wheldrake.” She touched him with a certain affection. “I have accepted the abiding logic—and it is the logic of power and conquest …”

“So decided my own ancestors,” said Elric quietly. “They perceived a multiverse that was all but random, and they conceived a philosophy to

formalize what they saw. Since their world was controlled by the random whims of the Lords of the Higher Worlds, they argued, then the only way of ensuring their survival was to gain as much power as they could—power at least as great as that of certain minor deities. Power enough, at least, to make Chaos bargain with them, rather than threaten and destroy. But what did that power gain them in the end? Less, I suspect, than your uncle gained by his decision …"

"My uncle had no sense," said Charion, bringing an end to the conversation. She turned her attention back to the toad, who had settled again and, while she scratched its vast back with her blade, stared moodily towards the horizon where dark ridges had begun to appear, the first sight of the reefs separating, according to the folk of Ulshinir, the inhabitable world from the uninhabitable.

They could hear surf now, could see it spuming against the volcanic rocks so that they gleamed with an unwelcoming blackness.

"*I am discontented, mistress. I am hungry.*" The toad turned its eyes upon Charion, and Wheldrake understood that he had a rival. He enjoyed the peculiar experience of being amused, jealous and profoundly terrified all at the same time.

Elric, too, had witnessed the toad's expression when it looked at Charion and he frowned. Some instinct informed him but was not, as yet, a conscious thought. He was content to wait until the instinct had matured, found words, had confirmation and become an idea. Meanwhile he smiled at Wheldrake's discomfort. "Fear not, friend Wheldrake! If you lack that fellow's beauty and perhaps even his specific charm, you almost certainly have the superior wit."

"Oh, indeed, sir," said Wheldrake, mocking himself a little, "and I know that wit usually counts for nothing in the game of love! There is no verse form invented that could easily carry such a tale—of a poet whose rival is a reptile! The heartache of it! The uncertainty! The folly!"

And he paused suddenly, eyeing the monstrous toad as it returned his attention, glaring at him as if it had understood every word.

Then it opened its lips and spoke slowly.

"*Thou shalt not have mine egg …*"

"Exactly, sir. Exactly what I was remarking to my friend here." With a bow so theatrical and elaborate even Elric was unsure what, at certain times, the poet was performing, Wheldrake went off for a while to concern himself with some business in the stern.

From the crow's nest came the cry of the lookout and this brought Gaynor round from where he had been staring apparently out to sea, almost as if he slept, or as if his soul had left his body. "What? Ah, yes. The navigator. Fetch up the navigator!"

And now, up from the starboard lower deck, comes a grey man—a man whose skin has been tanned by rain and wind but never by the sun, a man

whose eyes are hurt by the light, yet grateful for it, also. He rubs at wrists which, by the chafing on them, have lately been tied. He sniffs at the salty wind and he grins to himself, in memory.

"Navigator. Here's your means of earning your freedom," says Gaynor, signaling him up towards the prow which rises and falls with graceful speed as the wind takes the sail and the rocky shores of a dozen islands lie ahead—black, wicked teeth in mouths of roaring foam.

"Or killing us all and taking everyone to hell with me," says the navigator carelessly. He is a man of about forty-five, his light beard grey-brown as his shaggy hair and with grey-green eyes so piercing and strange that it is clear he has learned to keep them hooded, for now he squints as if against strong sun, though the sun lies behind him, and, with lithe movements of a man glad to be active again, he springs to the foredeck, squeezes around the toad's cage as though he encounters such beasts every day, and joins Gaynor in the prow. "You'd better haul in that sail as soon as you can," says the navigator, raising his voice above the gaining wind, "or turn about completely and take another approach. A couple of minutes and nothing will save us from those rocks!"

Gaynor turned shouting to his crew and Elric admired the skill with which the sailors went to their work, turning the ship just enough so that the sail hung limp on the mast, then hauling it in before the wind could find it again. The navigator shouted out encouragement, sending the men to their oars, for this was the only way to navigate the reefs at the edge of the world.

Slowly now the black-and-yellow ship moved through the tugging currents of the reef—a few inches this way, a few that, sometimes touching a rock so lightly there was the barest whisper of friction, sometimes seeming to squeeze between pillars of basalt and obsidian, while the wind yelled and the surf crashed and the whole world seemed once more to be given up to Chaos. It was noon before they had negotiated the first line of reefs and lay at anchor in the calm waters between themselves and the second line. Now the navigator gave instructions for the crew to eat well and to rest. They would not attempt the next line until the following day.

Next day they plunged again into cacophony and wave-tossed confusion as the navigator called out first one direction and then another, sometimes running back along the ship to take the wheel, sometimes clambering to the crow's nest to remind himself of what lay ahead, for it was clear he had navigated these reefs more than once.

Another river of clear, blue ocean running over pale sand; another patch of calm water—and the navigator made them rest another day.

Twelve days it took them to reach the farthest reef and look with unpleasant emotions upon the black surf pouring like oily smoke onto the massive natural barrier created by the last line of islands, onto beaches of smooth, fused obsidian. The Heavy Sea moved with extreme precision, the waves rising and falling with agonizing slowness, and the deep sounds it

made hinted at this sea having a voice largely inaudible to the human ear, for a peculiar silence existed over its dark, slow waters.

"It is like a sea of cold, liquefied lead," said Wheldrake. "It offends all natural laws!" At which remark of his own he shrugged, as if to say "What does not?" "How can any ship sail across that? The surface tension is rather more adequate than is needed, I would guess …"

The navigator lifted his head from where he had been resting it on the rail. "It can be crossed," he said. "It has been crossed. It is a sea that flows between the worlds, but there are folk for whom that ocean is as familiar as the one we have just left behind is to us. Mortal ingenuity can usually find a means of traveling through or over anything."

"But is it not a dangerous sea?" asked Wheldrake, looking upon it with considerable distaste.

"Oh, yes," agreed the navigator. "It is very dangerous." He spoke carelessly. "Although it could be argued, I suppose, that anything which becomes familiar is less dangerous …"

"Or more," said Elric with some feeling. He took one last look at the Heavy Sea and went below, to the cabin he shared with Wheldrake. That night he remained in his quarters, brooding on matters impossible to discuss with any other creature, while Wheldrake joined the navigator and the crew in celebration of their successful crossing of the reefs and in the hope of gaining a little more courage for the voyage that remained. But if Wheldrake had planned to learn more of the navigator, save that Gaynor had taken him aboard only a couple of days before they came to Ulshinir, he was disappointed. Nor did he see anything else of Charion, his beloved, that night. Something stopped him from returning to the cabin—some sense of discretion—and he stayed, instead, upon the deck for a while, listening to the sluggish breakers splashing against the sea-smoothed obsidian and he thought of the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the stories of the Boat of Souls, of Charon, Boatman to the Gods, for to him this truly seemed like some netherworld ocean—perhaps the waters which lapped the very shores of limbo.

And now Wheldrake found himself beside the cage where the monster slept, its eyes tight shut as it snored and snuffled and smacked its loose, spongy lips, and at that moment the poet felt a certain sympathy for the creature, who was as surely trapped into compromise with Gaynor as almost everyone else aboard the ship. He leaned his arm on the rail of black, carved wood and watched as the moon emerged from behind a cloud and its light fell upon the scales, the leathery folds of flesh, the almost translucent webbing between the enormous fingers, and marveled at such ugliness, enraptured of such beauty. Whereupon he thought of himself, thought of a phrase, a certain cadence, felt about his pockets for his ink, his quill and his parchment and set to work in the moonlight to find romantic comparisons between Wheldrake the Poet and Khorghakh the Toad which was, he felt with a certain degree of self-satisfaction, all the more difficult if one attempted, for instance, some

version of trochaic dimeter …

Of this schism
Occultism,
Lately risen,
(Euphemism)
Calls for heroism rare.

Which occupied him so successfully that it was not until dawn that he placed his pining head upon his pillow and fell into the sweetest dreams of love he had ever known …

Dawn found all but Wheldrake on deck, faces upturned towards a lowering sky from which fell a languorous rain. It had grown warmer overnight and the humidity was very high. Elric tugged at his clothes and wished that he were naked. He felt as if he walked through tepid mead. The navigator was up on the foredeck with the toad; they seemed to be in conference. Then the grey man straightened and came back to where Elric, Gaynor and Charion stood together under a rough awning upon which the rain drops thumped with deliberate rhythm. He brushed his own woolen sleeve. "It's like mercury, this stuff. You should try to swallow some. It won't harm you, but it's almost impossible—you have to chew it. Now, Prince Gaynor the Damned, you struck a bargain with me and I have fulfilled the first part. Whereupon you said you would return to me what was mine. Before, you agreed, we advance into the Heavy Sea."

The grey-green gaze was steady upon that shifting helm. They were eyes that feared almost nothing.

"True," says Gaynor, "such a bargain was made—" and he seems to hesitate, as if weighing the odds of breaking his oath, then deciding he would gain more by honouring it—"and I shall keep it, naturally. One moment." He leaves the quarter-deck to go below and re-emerge with a small bundle—perhaps a wrapped greatcoat—which he puts into the navigator's hands. For a second those strange eyes flare and the mouth grins oddly, then the grey man is impassive again. Carrying the bundle he returns to take a further word or two with the toad. Then it's "Get a man to the lookout" and "Oarsmen to their positions" and "Keep that sail down—'tis a slow wind that will fill her, but 'tis worth the attempt" and the navigator is moving about the black-and-yellow ship—a man of the wild sea, a man of well-garnered wisdom and natural intellect, everything that a ship's commander should be—encouraging, shouting, whistling, joking with all—even the great old toad that grumbled his way from the cage as Charion released him, to creep bit by bit to the prow, and lie along the creaking bowsprit, forcing the ship still further down into the sea—down now through a narrow channel (pointed out by the navigator hanging in the rigging above the toad's green head) where white water meets black, where airy foam meets leaden droplets, suspended in the thick air. The prow of the ship—sharp and honed like a razor in the manner of the *bakrasim* of the Vilmirian Peninsula—sliced into that sluggish mass, driven by the

toad's weight, guided now by the toad's bellows translated by the navigator to the steersman, and they are entering the Heavy Sea, going into darkness, going into the place where the sky itself seems like a kind of skin off which all sounds echo and the fading echoes are themselves returned until it seems the voices of tormented mortals in all their billions are sounding in their agonized ears and it is impossible to hear anything but that. They are tempted to signal to Prince Gaynor, standing himself at the helm now, to turn the ship about, for they must all die of the noise.

But Gaynor the Damned would not heed them. His terrible helm is lifted against the elements, his armoured body challenges the multiverse, defiant of the natural or the supernatural, or any other form which might threaten him! For he is never alarmed by death.

The toad croaks and gestures, the navigator signs with his hands, and Gaynor turns the wheel a little this way, a little that, fine as a needlewoman at her stretcher, while Elric holds his hands against his ears, seeks for something to stuff into them, to stop the pain which must surely burst his brain. Up on deck, ghastly, comes Wheldrake—

—and then the sound is over. A silence encloses the ship.

"You, too," says Wheldrake in some relief. "I thought it was last night's wine. Or possibly the poetry …"

He stares in dismay at the slow-moving darkness all around them, looks up at the bruised sky from which the leisurely rain still falls, and returns without further remark to his cabin for a moment.

The ship still moves, the Heavy Sea still heaves, and through this liquid maze the craft of Chaos cleaves. The toad groans out his orders, the navigator shouts; and Gaynor on his quarter-deck turns the wheel a fraction south. The toad's webbed hand makes urgent signs, the wheel is turned again, and onward into laggard seas drive Gaynor and his men. And on every single face of them, save Elric and his friend, is a wild, dark glee, and a sniffing at the sea for the smell of purest fear. They sniffed for fear like hounds for blood; they sniffed on that sluggish air; they sniffed for danger and scent of death and they tasted the wind like bread. And the toad groans out his orders and his mouth is wet with greed, and the toad's breath wheezes in the toad's dark maw, for soon he must come to feed.

"*Master, I must feed!*"

The strange water rolls like mercury over the ship's decks as she plunges on, sometimes threatening, it seems, to become stuck in a glutinous wave. And at last the ship will not move at all. The toad takes ropes from the prow and, its wide feet spread upon the water, long enough to break the surface tension before treading on again at what is clearly a natural gait, hauls the whole ship behind it. Behind him, momentarily, in the heavy water are the toad's footprints and then the tension is broken by the prow until at last the toad is swimming again, gasping with something akin to pleasure as the great droplets roll over his scales. There is a noise from it; a noise of joy: a noise

that finds distant echo somewhere above, suggesting that they are in fact within a vast cave, or perhaps some more organic manifestation of Chaos. Then the booming song of the toad dies away and the creature comes paddling back to the ship, to crawl slowly aboard, tipping down the prow again, and resume its position along the bowsprit while the navigator climbs back overhead and once more Gaynor takes up the wheel.

Elric, fascinated by these events, watches the drops of water roll from the toad's glistening body and fall back into the sea. Above, in the rolling darkness, come sudden flashes of dusky scarlet and deep blue, as if whatever sun burns on them is not like any they have seen before. Now even the air is so thick that they must gulp at it like stranded fish and one man falls to the deck in a fit, but Gaynor does not lift a gauntleted hand from the wheel nor make any movement of his head to suggest that they must stop. And not one, now, asks him to stop. Elric realizes they are like-minded nihilists who have suffered too much already to fear any pain that might lie ahead. Certainly they do not fear a clean death. Unlike Gaynor, these men are not questing for death with his desperation. These are men who would kill themselves if they did not believe that living was just a little more interesting than dying. Elric recognized in them something of what he frequently felt—a terrible, deep boredom with all the reminders one met of human venality and folly—yet there was also in him another feeling, a memory of his people before they founded Melniboné, when they were gentler and lived with the existing realities rather than attempt to force their own; a memory of justice and perfection. He went to the rail and looked out over the slow-heaving waters of the Heavy Sea and he wondered where, in all that sluggish darkness, were the three sisters to be found. And did they still have the box of black rosewood? And did that box still contain his father's soul?

Wheldrake appeared, with Charion Phatt, chanting some rhyme of almost mesmeric simplicity and then blushing suddenly and stopping.

"It would be useful, something like that," said Mistress Phatt, "for the rowers. They need a steady sort of rhythm. I have no intention, I assure you, Master Wheldrake, of marrying that toad. I have no intention of marrying at all. I believe you have heard my views on the perils of domesticity."

"Hopeless love!" wailed Wheldrake, with what was almost relish. He cast a scrap of paper over the side. It fell flat upon the water, undulating with it as if given a spark of life of its own.

"Whatever pleases you, sir." She winked at Elric cheerfully.

"You seem in excellent spirits," said the albino, "for one who is embarked upon such a voyage as this."

"I can sense the sisters," she said. "I told Prince Gaynor. I sensed them an hour ago. And I can sense them now. They have returned to this plane. And if they are here, then soon my uncle and my grandmother, and perhaps my cousin, will find them, too."

"You think the sisters will reunite you with your family? That's the

only reason you seek them?"

"I believe that if they live it is inevitable that we shall meet, most probably through the sisters."

"But the Rose and the boy are dead."

"I said I did not know where they were, not that they were dead …" It was clear she feared the worst but was refusing to admit it.

Elric did not pursue the subject. He knew what it was like to live with grief.

And on sailed the Chaos ship, into the slow silence of the Heavy Sea, with the croaking of the great toad and the voice of the navigator the only sounds to cut through the swampy air.

That night they dropped anchor and all but Gaynor retired. The damned prince strode the deck with a steady pace, almost in rhythm with the languid waves, and occasionally Elric, who could not sleep but had no wish to join Gaynor on deck, heard the creature cry out as if startled. "Who's there?"

Elric wondered what kind of denizens occupied the Heavy Sea. Were there others, like the toad but of a more malevolent disposition?

At Gaynor's third cry, he got to his feet, pulling on some clothes, his scabbarded sword in his hand. Wheldrake, too, was disturbed, but merely raised himself up in his bunk and murmured a question.

Out into the salty miasma went Elric, seeking the source of Gaynor's shout. Then he saw, looming over the port rail, the bulk of what could only be some kind of ship. A tall, wooden construction—a kind of castellated tower from which were already swinging half-a-dozen figures, all of them armed with long, savage pikes and flenchers—brutal weapons, but effective in this kind of fighting.

But not, reflected Elric with a certain humour, as effective as a black runesword.

And with that he dragged the hellblade from its scabbard and ran on bare feet along the deck to greet the first of the pirates as they dropped aboard the ship.

Above them, on the foredeck, the navigator appeared for a moment, glaring upward and moving with an odd series of leaps back into the rigging. "Dramian Toad-hunters!" he cried to Elric. "They're after our guide! We are dead without it!"

Then the navigator had disappeared again and the first of the hunters stabbed at Elric with the jagged points of his pike—

—and died almost without realizing it, wriggling like a speared fish as his soul was sucked into the blade …

Stormbringer seemed to purr with pleasure. The sword's song grew louder, greedier as one by one the hunters went down.

Elric, used to supernatural foes, stood amongst the growing pile of corpses like a farmer scything hay on a pleasant summer's day and it was left to Charion and the crew to finish off the few who now tried desperately to get

back to their ship …

… But Elric was ahead of them, clambering up one of their own lines as a hunter desperately tried to saw at it with his pike. Elric reached the hunter before the rope was sheared and he drove the sword deep through the man's breastbone, watching him writhe. The hunter tried to keep his hold on the rope, then grasped the blade itself with both hands, as the sword relished its gradual feasting on the rich marrow of his soul. He tried to push himself off the sword, to cast himself into the dark water that now showed between the two ships, and on an impulse Elric released his grip on Stormbringer and watched with a sense of profound calm as sword and victim went plunging downwards. Weaponless, he continued his climb up the rope, swinging over the crenelations to discover that the bulky forward tower belonged to a vessel of singular slimness. It was a ship designed to race upon the surface of this peculiar ocean. Elric could see large outriggers, like the limbs of some huge water-insect, curving into the darkness.

And then, from a hatch in the deck, came more of the hunters, all armed with flenchers and grinning with the prospect of their butchery. Elric cursed himself for a fool and backed away from them, his eyes searching for some means of escape.

The hunters had the look of men who intended to enjoy their work. The first made an experimental swing with his flencher. The broad, curved blade whistled in the sultry air.

They were almost upon Elric when the albino heard a deep growling from somewhere over his head and thought the toad had climbed the tower undetected. But what he saw instead was a great snarling dog, silvery in the darkness, springing for the throat of the nearest hunter and tearing at it until it was nothing more than bloody meat, glaring up with a triumphant flaring of its nostrils as the other hunters fled. Elric did not care at that moment where his rescuer had come from. He merely thanked the animal and glanced down onto the deck to see how his companions fared. He saw Charion finishing off an adversary and lifting her lovely head in a high, ululating note.

The few hunters who still lived ran for the sides in blind panic; for now, over the starboard rail, its lips smacking and its eyes gleaming, breathing with wheezing slowness, crawled the toad they had sought to capture for themselves. The dog had vanished.

Khorghakh hesitated once he was aboard, his bulk enveloping parts of the rail and the hatches, and he cocked his head enquiringly.

From somewhere on the Chaos ship Elric heard Gaynor's voice crying out, exultant and full of an unusual excitement.

"*Now, toad! Now, my darling, now you can feed!*"

Later, when what was left of the hunters and their ship was burning in the darkness of the Heavy Sea and Khorghakh in his cage was snoring with monstrous hands upon a swollen belly, and Charion sat cross-legged beside him, as if comforted by the beast's enormous power, Elric walked slowly along the deck searching for his sword.

He had not for a moment believed that he had rid himself of the blade when he let it go with its victim. In the past whenever he had tried to abandon Stormbringer it had always returned to him. Now he regretted his folly. He was likely to need his sword. In trepidation, wondering if the blade had been stolen by some supernatural agency, he continued to search.

He searched again, in the shadows of the ship. He knew the blade refused to be separated from him. He had fully expected it to return. Yet the

scabbard was gone, too, which suggested theft. He looked, also, for the dog which had appeared to help him and which had gone again so suddenly. Who, aboard, had owned such a dog? Or had it belonged to the hunters and, like the toad, taken vengeance on its oppressors?

As he passed the cabin under the foredeck, he heard a familiar sound. It came from Gaynor's berth—a low, peculiar moaning. He was astonished and further alarmed at the power commanded by the Prince of the Damned. No mortal could have taken up that naked sword and not been harmed, especially when it had so recently drawn enormous psychic force into itself!

Softly Elric moved to Gaynor's door. Now there was only silence on the other side.

The door was not locked. Gaynor was careless of any mortal attempt on his life or his person.

Elric paused for a second before flinging open the door, to reveal a sudden eruption of yelling light, a screeching and a hissing, and then Gaynor stood before him, adjusting his helm with one metal-shod hand, holding the runesword in the other. The runes along the blade juddered and whispered, as if the sword itself understood that the impossible had occurred. Yet Elric noticed that Gaynor trembled and that he had to put his other hand upon the runesword's hilt, to hold it steady, though his stance remained apparently casual.

Elric stretched his open palm towards the blade.

"Even you, Prince of the Damned, could not wield my runesword with impunity. Do you not understand that the blade and I are one? Do you not know that we are brothers, that sword and I? And that we have other kin who may be summoned to our aid when we require it? Know you nothing of that battle-blade's qualities, prince?"

"Only what I have heard of in legends." Gaynor sighed within his helm. "I would test it for myself. Will you lend me your sword, Prince Elric?"

"I could more easily lend you a limb." The albino gestured again for the return of his sword.

Prince Gaynor was reluctant. He studied the runes, he tested the balance. And then he returned the blade to both steel hands. "I do not fear your sword will kill me, Elric."

"I doubt it has the power to kill you, Gaynor. Is that what you desire of it? It might take your soul. It might transmogrify you. I doubt, however, if it will grant you your desire."

Before he gave it up, Gaynor laid one metal-clad finger upon the blade. "Is that the power of the anti-balance, I wonder?"

"I have not heard of such a power," said Elric. He slid the scabbard back onto his belt.

"They say it is a power even more ambitious than the Lords of the Higher Worlds. More dangerous, more cruel, more effective than anything known to the multiverse. They say the power of the anti-balance has the

means of changing the whole nature of the multiverse in a single stroke."

"I know only that Fate has forged us together, that blade and I," said Elric. "Our destinies are the same." He glanced around Gaynor's sparely furnished cabin. "I have little interest in the broadly cosmic, Prince Gaynor. I have desires rather less exaggerated than most I have met of late. I seek only to find the answers to certain questions I have asked myself. I would gladly be free of all Lords of the Higher Worlds and their machinations. Even of the Balance itself."

Gaynor turned away from him. "You are an interesting creature, Elric of Melniboné. Ill-suited to serve Chaos, it would seem."

"Ill-suited for most things, sir," said Elric. "To serve Chaos is merely a family tradition with us."

Gaynor's helm came round again to stare broodingly at the albino. "You believe it is possible to banish Law and Chaos entirely—to banish them from the multiverse?"

"Of that I am not so sure. But I have heard of places where neither Law nor Chaos have jurisdiction." Elric was too cautious to mention Tanelorn. "I have heard of worlds where the Balance rules unchallenged, also …"

"I, too, have known such places. I dwelled in one …" There came a frightful chuckling from within the shifting steel helm and then a pause as the Prince of the Damned moved slowly to the far side of his cabin and appeared to be staring through the porthole.

His final words were uttered with such chilling ferocity that Elric, completely unprepared for them, felt he had been struck physically, to his vitals, by iron of such infinite coldness it reached to his soul …

"*Oh, Elric, I hate thee with such jealous hate! I hate thee for thine insistent relish of life! For what I once was and what I might have become, I hate thee! For what thou aspireth to, I hate thee most of all …*"

As he bent to close the door, the albino looked back at the figure of Gaynor and it seemed to him that the armour which enclosed the damned prince had long since ceased to protect him from any of the things he truly feared. Now the armour had become nothing more than a prison.

"And for my part, Gaynor the Damned," he said with gentle subtlety, "I pity thee with all my soul."

CHAPTER FOUR

Land at last! A Certain Conflict of Interests. Concerning the Anatomy of Lycanthropy.

"In my own world, sir, sad to say, human prejudice is matched only by human folly. Not a soul *claims* to be prejudiced, of course, as there are few who would describe themselves as fools …" Ernest Wheldrake addressed the grey navigator as they sat at breakfast on deck the next morning beneath a leaden sky upon the Heavy Sea and watched black waves rise and fall with what seemed unnatural slowness.

Elric, chewing on a piece of barely palatable salt beef, remarked that this seemed a quality of a good deal of society, throughout the multiverse.

The navigator turned his sharp green-grey eyes upon the albino and there was a certain restrained humour in his face when he spoke. "I have known whole Spheres where reason and gentleness, respect for self and for others, have existed together with vigorous intellectual and artistic pursuits—and where the supernatural world was merely a metaphor …"

At which Wheldrake smiled. "Even in my England, sir, such perfection was rarely found."

"I did not say perfection was common," murmured the grey man, and he curled his lithe old body off the bench and stood to peer into the green-black sky and stretch his long limbs and lick his thin lips and sniff at the wind and turn towards the prow and the toad, whose sleepy bellows had sounded like rage to the waking passengers. "There is a comet up there!" He pointed one tapering finger. "It means a prince has died." He listened for a moment until, mysteriously satisfied, he loped on about his duties.

"Where I once lived," came the sepulchral melody of Gaynor the Damned as he climbed up from his cabin, "they said that when a comet died a *poet* died." He clapped a shimmering gauntlet upon Wheldrake's resisting shoulder. "Do they say that, where you are from, Master Wheldrake?"

"You are in ungentle spirits I see, this morning, sir," Wheldrake spoke gently, his cool anger overwhelming his fear. "Perhaps you have your toad's indigestion?"

Gaynor withdrew his hand and acknowledged the little man's admonishment. "Well, well, sir. Some princes are more eager for death than others. And poets, for life, we know. Lady Charion." A bow that set his whole helm to flowing with angry fire. "Prince Elric. Aha! And Master Snare—" for back from his post ran the grey navigator.

"I sought you earlier, Prince Gaynor. We had an agreement between us."

"There is no hope for you," said Gaynor the Damned, making a movement forward, perhaps of sympathy. "She is dead. She died when the church collapsed. You must seek your bride in limbo now, Esbern Snare."

"You promised you would tell me—"

"I promised I would tell thee the truth. And the truth is what I have told thee. She is dead. Her soul awaits thee."

The grey navigator bowed his shaggy head. "You know I cannot join her! I have forfeited my right to life after death! And in return, O, Heaven help me! I have joined with the Undead …" With that sudden statement of feeling, Esbern Snare rushed back to the forecastle and ran up into the rigging, to stare blindly into the seething horizon.

Whereupon Gaynor the Damned made a sound like a sigh, deep within his helm, and Elric understood how he had been rescued on the ship and why there was a fellow-feeling evident between the navigator and the deathless prince.

But Wheldrake was gasping with a kind of joy and clapping his hand upon the breakfast table, making the stewed herbs slop, unmourned, from cup to cloth. "By Heaven, sir, that's Esbjorn Snorre, is it not? Now I have the trick of your pronunciation—and his, I note. I make no claims. We are, after all, rather grateful for that singular telepathy which provides us with the means, so frequently, of our survival in some highly inclement social weather—we should not begrudge benign Mother Nature a few regional accents—by way of a little light-hearted relief to her in her ever-vigilant concern for our continuing existence. Astonishing sir, when you think of it."

"You have heard of the navigator?" Lady Charion caught, as it were, at the coat-tails of his conversation's substance.

"I have heard of Esbern Snare. But the ending of his tale was a happy one. He tricked a troll into building a church for him and his bride to be married in. The troll's wife gave away the troll's name and so released Esbern Snare from his bargain. The troll's wife can still be heard wailing, they say, under Ulshoi hill. I wrote a kind of ballad about it in my *Norwegian Songs*. Pillaged, of course, by Whittier, but we'll say no more of that. No doubt he needed the money. Still, plagiarism's only dishonourable if the coin you earn with it is worth less than the coin you stole."

Again, Charion clutched bravely for the original substance:

"He married happily, you say? But you heard what Gaynor told him?"

"This is a sequel, it seems, to the original tale. I only know of the successful trickster. Any subsequent tragedy had been forgotten by the folklore of my day. Sometimes, you know, it occurs to me that I am in a dream in which all those heroes and heroines, villains and villainesses of my verses have come to life to haunt me, to befriend me, to make me one of themselves. A man, after all, could rarely hope to find such varied company in Putney …"

"So you do not know why Esbern Snare is aboard this ship, Master Wheldrake?"

"No better than you, my lady."

"And you, Prince Elric?" She attracted the albino's wandering

attention. “Do you know this story?”

Elric shook his head.

“I only know,” he said, “that he is a shape-changer and, that most cursed of souls, a person of rare goodness and sanity. Imagine such torment as is his!”

Even Wheldrake bowed his head, as if in respect. For there are few more terrible fates than that of the immortal separated, by force of the most profound natural logic, from those immortal souls it cherishes in life. It can know only the pain of death but never the ecstasy of everlasting life. Its pleasures and rewards are short-lived; its torment, eternal.

And this made Elric think of his father, lingering in that timeless destruction of Imrryr’s ancestor; himself separated from his one abiding love by his willingness to bargain with his patron demon—even betray him—for a little more unearned power on Earth.

The albino found himself brooding upon the nature of all unholy bargains, of his own dependency upon the hellsword Stormbringer, of his willingness to summon supernatural aid without thought of any spiritual consequences to himself and, perhaps most significantly, of his *unwillingness* to find a way to cure himself of the occult’s seductive attraction; for there was a part of his strange brain that was curious to follow its own fate; to learn whatever disastrous conclusion lay in store for it—it needed to know the end of the saga: the value, perhaps, of its torment.

Elric found that he had walked up the deck to the forecastle, past the reverberant toad, to put his back against the bowsprit’s copper-shod knuckle and stare up at the navigator as he hung, still motionless, in the rigging.

“Where do you journey, Esbern Snare?” he asked.

The grey man cocked his head, as if hearing a distant but familiar whistle. Then his pale green-grey eyes stared down into the albino’s crimson orbs and a great gust of air escaped him, and a tear appeared upon his cheek.

“Nowhere, now,” said Esbern Snare. “Nowhere, now, sir.”

“Would you continue in Gaynor’s service?” Elric asked. “Even when land is sighted?”

“Until I choose to do otherwise, sir. As you shall yourself observe. There is land ahead, no more than a mile before us.”

“You can see it?” Elric asked in surprise, attempting to peer into the swirling vapours of the Heavy Sea.

“No, sir,” said Esbern Snare. “But I can smell it.”

And land it soon was. Land rising up from the slow, awful waters of the Heavy Sea; land like a wakened monster, an angry shadow, all sharp ridges and jagged points; cliffs of black marble; beaches of carbon, and black breakers which poured like the smoke of hell upon that squealing shore …

Land so inhospitable the voyagers who looked at it now were all pretty much of the same accord, that the Heavy Sea was less daunting; and it was Wheldrake who suggested they sail on until they found a more accessible

island.

But Gaynor shook his flickering helm and lifted up his glowing fist and put his steel palm upon the slender shoulders of Charion Phatt. “You told me, child, that the other Phatts are here. Have they found the sisters?”

The young woman shook her head slowly. Her face was grave and her eyes seemed to look into some different reality. “They have not found the sisters.”

“Yet they—and the sisters—are here?”

“Beyond this—aye—in there …” Her mouth grew a little slack now as she lifted her head and pointed towards the massive cliffs dashed by that black foam. “Aye—there—and there, they go—yet—oh, Uncle! I see why! The sisters ride on. But Uncle? Where is grandma? The sisters go towards the East. It is in their nature to bear always eastward, now. They are going home.”

“Good,” says Gaynor with deep satisfaction. “We must find a place to land.”

And Wheldrake confided to Elric that he had the feeling Gaynor was prepared to wreck them all now, in order to make landfall and continue his pursuit.

And yet the ship was beached at last upon that black, salty shingle up which the gougy tide lazily rolled and as lazily retreated.

“It is like,” said Wheldrake in distaste as, the skirts of his frock-coat wrapped around his narrow chest, he stepped gingerly through the shallows, “a form of molasses. What causes this, Master Snare?”

His bundle under his arm, Esbern Snare lifted his long legs through the liquid. “Nothing,” he said, “save a minor distortion in the fabric of time. Such places are not uncommon in this particular Sphere. In my own they were rare. I came across a small one—a matter of a few feet—near the North Pole. That would have been around the turn of your century, Master Wheldrake, I think.”

“Which one, sir? I am a native of several. I am, as it were, timeless. Perhaps I have been granted my own particular ironic doom, ha, ha!”

Now Esbern Snare loped ahead, up the beach to where a great crack had opened in the wall of marble and through the jagged opening poured a shaft of watery golden light. “I think we have our pathway to the cliff-top,” he said.

His bundle between his teeth, he was already climbing—his long limbs perfect for the route he chose from jutting crag to jutting crag—a great, grey spider scuttling up the rock, finding first one ledge and then another, until he had marked a path for the others, an easy means of climbing from the beach to the surface of the cliff. They mounted this, one at a time, with Elric bringing up the rear. On Gaynor’s orders the sailors were already letting down their sail and moving the ship back into the water while from the forecastle came the wailing and groanings of a recently awakened toad who only now realized that its beloved was departing, perhaps for ever.

Soon they all stood upon the cliff and tried to look back at the ocean,

but already billowing black cloud buried the Heavy Sea from view, and all they could hear was the sinister tide scraping on the beaches, increasingly faint—as if the entire scene retreated downwards, away from them—or as if the cliff rose up.

Elric turned. They were above the cloud-line now and the air was easier to breathe. Stretching away from them was a flat plain of gleaming rock—an immense vista of marble in which, here and there, gleamed little lights, as if there were creatures so densely constituted that they lived in the marble as we might live in oxygen, and were occupied, domestically, below.

Esbern Snare voiced his own provincial fears. "This has the look of troll country," he said. "Have I traveled so far to endure the hospitality of Trollheim? What an irony that would be."

Gaynor silenced him. "If we were all left to stand about bemoaning the particulars of our special dooms, gentlemen, we should be here for ever. Given that at least two of our company are immortal, this could prove singularly boring. I would beg of you, Esbern Snare, neither to keen nor to make any other vocal reminder of your soul's agony."

And the grey navigator frowned, perhaps a little surprised by an accusation which might have been better applied, he guessed, to the accuser himself. But Gaynor made no such acknowledgment. Of that socially misliked company he seemed the only one unwilling to extend to others the tolerance he longed for, the tolerance exemplified by the sublime justice of the Cosmic Balance which he had forsaken. Increasingly, it seemed, he grew both frightened and impatient, perhaps because he had secrets from them—a prior knowledge of this land and its inhabitants? He fell silent now and spoke no more to them until at last the uncompromising hardness of the marble gave way to earth and then to grass and the land began to slope downwards towards a surprisingly lovely valley through which a stream meandered and whose hills were clad with all kinds of thickly growing winter trees. Yet there was no sign of habitation and the air grew steadily colder as they descended the trackless slopes towards the valley floor until they were glad of the extra garments they had brought in their packs.

Only Esbern Snare refused to put his bundled apparel about his shoulders. Instead he hugged the parcel tighter to his chest, as if threatened. And again Elric felt a frisson of understanding for the grey man who only today had lost the last of his hope.

They camped that night in a pine-spinney, with a big fire roaring against the bitter cold and a moon appearing, almost unexpectedly overhead in the clear winter sky, huge and silver and casting deep shadows amongst the trees—shadows which were calm contrast to the leaping, unsettled shadows made by the great fire.

Soon the fire had grown so hot, fed by a lucky find of dead wood, that Elric, Charion and Wheldrake were forced to move a little further away, lest they be scorched in their sleep. Only Esbern Snare and Gaynor the Damned

were left in the blaze of firelight, the grey, sad man, and the supernatural prince in his unstable armour—two doomed immortals attempting to warm their souls against the chill of eternal night; creatures who would have chosen the flames of hell rather than endure their present suffering, who longed for another reality, such as once they had both known, where pain was banished, and men and women were rarely tempted to give up the peace of their souls in return for the gaudy treasures, the greedy pleasures of the occult.

"What a beautiful thing," said Charion, almost in echo of these thoughts, "is a butterfly's wing. The bounty of nature bestow'd on a rose. Do you know that one, Master Wheldrake?"

The poet admitted that it was not in his repertoire. He considered the metre. He wondered if it were the best choice for the sentiment.

"I think I am ready for sleep now," she said, a hint of regret in her tone.

"Sleep is a preferred theme in my own work," he agreed. "Daniel's sonnet on the subject is excellent. At least, academically speaking. Do you know it?

"Care-charmer Sleep, son of the sable Night,
Brother to Death, in silent darkness born,
Relieve my languish, and restore the light;
With dark forgetting of my care return,
And let the day be time enough to mourn
The shipwreck of my ill-adventured youth."

He quoted on, while a thin, cold breeze ran amongst the trees and soon his snores had gently and unostentatiously joined the rest …

Dawn had brought some snow. While most of the party shivered against it and cursed their bad luck, Esbern Snare opened his mouth and drew in the smell of it, licked his lips at the taste of it; a spring in his gait as he performed his tasks in the making of the morning meal. But already there was conflict as Gaynor cried: "Do you not recall a bargain made between us, my lady? A bargain which you yourself proposed!"

"A bargain which is now ended, sir. You have had your several uses of me. I become my own woman again. I brought you here and you shall seek your sisters here, but with no help from me!"

"Our interests are the same! It is folly to separate." Prince Gaynor's hand was upon the pommel of his broadsword as if he would threaten her had his pride permitted it. He had thought his native power was enough to persuade her and this was evident in every thwarted movement of his body, his frustrated tones. "Your family will find the sisters. They are bound to. We are upon the same quest!"

"No," said Charion. "For whatever reason—and I cannot detect one—the sisters go that way, but my uncle goes yonder—and to my uncle, sir, I must follow!"

"You agreed we should seek the sisters together."

"That was until I knew my uncle and grandma were in danger. I go to them. I go, sir, unquestionably, to them!"

And with that she was off through the trees, bidding farewell to no-one, dashing the snow from the branches she bent in her progress, her breath steaming and her wiry body gathering speed, as if she had no more time to lose.

Wheldrake was picking up his books and his miscellaneous possessions shouting out for her to pause. He would go with her! She needed a man, he said, upon her adventure. His own farewells were rapid and half-ended as he fled upon his beloved's trail leaving a cold and sudden silence behind him as, over the ashes of the guttering fire, the three doomed men regarded one another in uncertain camaraderie.

"Will you seek the sisters with me, Elric?" Gaynor asked at last. His voice was calmer now, almost chastened.

"The sisters have what I require, so I must find them in order to ask them for it," said Elric.

"And you, Esbern Snare?" Gaynor asked. "Are you with us, still?"

"I have no interest in your elusive sisters," said Esbern Snare, "unless they have the key to my release."

"They carry two keys, it seems," said Elric, putting a friendly hand on the grey man's shoulder, "so perhaps they have a third for you."

"Very well," said Esbern Snare. "I will join you tomorrow. Do you go towards the East?"

"Always east, we've learned, for our sisters," said Gaynor.

So the three of them—tall figures, lean as winter weasels—began their journey eastward, up the steep slopes of the valley, through frozen foothills, to a range of ancient mountains, whose rotting granite threatened to collapse with every foot they set upon it, while the snow came thicker now and they must break ice to get their water, save at noon, when the thin sun warmed the world enough to make it run; wide ribbons of silver racing through the glittering white shards.

Gaynor continued to brood in silence while Esbern Snare, loping ahead much of the time, grew increasingly alert as if he had found his native element. And all the while his bundle never left him, whether he slept or ate, so that one day, as they made cautious progress above a deep gorge which had filled with snow to make a sort of glacier, below which a fierce torrent could be heard rushing through caverns and tunnels it had carved through the ice, Elric asked him why he valued the thing so greatly. Was it some keepsake, perhaps?

They had paused for breath upon the narrow path, their feet hardly as long as the track was wide, but Gaynor had marched tirelessly on, apparently oblivious of the depth and steepness of the gorge.

"It is a treasure in a sense, sir!" Esbern Snare uttered a humourless laugh. "For I must value it as I value nothing else. As I value, if you like, my very life. My soul, I fear, has modest worth now, or I would name that, also."

"So it is precious to you, indeed," said Elric. He talked chiefly to rid himself of the grief he felt for losing Wheldrake's company, as if part of him —that part which relished life and human love—was forbidden to him, banished. He felt as frozen as the glacier below, with a torrent bursting within him, unable to find expression in the ways he most valued—the ordinary ways of loving the world and the friends it offered. Perhaps he lacked the refinements of language required to adapt and modify his sentiments and yet he understood, better than anyone, how language itself was the perfect and perhaps the only honourable way of earning his right to respect among those denizens of the natural world whom he, in turn, respected. Yet still it was through action, rather than words, that he tried to accomplish his unvoiced ambitions. Thoughtless action, blind romance, had led him to destroy everything he cherished and he had sought understanding in taking only the action suggested by others, by following the trade of other impoverished Melnibonéan nobles, of mercenary—and a mercenary of exceptional accomplishments and gifts. Even now his quest was not of his own devising. In his heart of hearts he knew he must soon begin to look for some more positive means of achieving what he had hoped to achieve with the sack of the Dreaming City and the destruction of the Bright Empire of Melniboné. Thus far he had looked chiefly at the past. But there were no answers there. Only examples which scarcely suited his present condition.

There was a long silence as the two men stood together on the narrow ridge, staring across the gorge at the far banks, at the lifeless landscape, where not a bird or a rabbit could be seen, as if time, already slowing in the Heavy Sea, had come almost to a stop, and the crashing of the water underneath the ice seemed to fade away to leave only the steady sound of their breathing.

"I loved her," said the grey man suddenly, his breast convulsing, almost as if struck by something heavy. Another pause, as if he drowned, and then his manner was steady again. "Her name was Helva of Nesvek, daughter of the Lord of Nesvek, and the finest and most womanly of mortals, in all her wit and art, her grace and her charity; there was none saintlier, nor more natural (in natural matters), than my Helva. Well, I was of good family but not wealthy in the way that Lord Nesvek was wealthy and it had been pronounced by the great lord himself that his daughter's hand should go to the man worthiest of God. I understood that in Lord Nesvek's judgment God was inclined to bless those worthiest of Him with worldly riches and this, to Nesvek's lord, was the true and proper order of things. So I knew I could not win my Helva's hand, though she had already chosen me. I conceived the

notion of seeking supernatural aid and, in short, made a bargain with a troll, by which the troll should build me a fine cathedral church—the finest in the Northlands—whereupon, when the building was completed, I was to have discovered the name of the architect or forfeit my eyes and heart to him. Well, by happy chance, I overheard the troll's wife singing to her infant child, telling him that he should not cry, for soon Fine, his father, would be home with a human's eyes and heart for him to feast upon.

"Thus did I achieve my end and Lord Nesvek found it impossible, of course, to refuse a suitor who could build such a magnificent monument to God, and at monumental cost, quite evidently.

"Meanwhile, of course, the poor troll-wife, the source of my salvation, was beaten regularly by her infuriated spouse and I began the building of our estate, about a mile from Kallundborg, where I had built the church and would be able to see the spire from my new house's tower. The building went well, even without trollish labour, and soon the hall was raised, with good outhouses and cottages for the servants, on prime land, thanks to my Helva's dowry. Thus were we all accommodated, it seemed. Until the coming of the wolf to our land that next winter, when we settled to enjoy the long nights with merriment and stories and all manner of festivity, as well as the hard work of winter stock-caring. Made harder, now, because of our wolf. A huge beast, twice the weight and bulk of a tall man, the wolf had killed dogs, cattle, sheep and a child in its search for food. Few bones had been found, and those gnawed through for the marrow, as if the wolf fed cubs as well as itself. Which we found strange for dead of winter, though it has been known for wolves to bear more than one litter in a year, especially after a mild previous winter and an early spring. Then the wolf killed the pregnant wife of my steward and carried off what remains we did not find in the shallow hole it had rested in while it devoured the flesh it needed to continue its rapid escape from us. For, of course, we pursued it.

"One by one the other men gave up, for a variety of reasons which the steward and I accepted with good grace, and then there were only the two of us following the wolf's trail into a deep, wooded ravine, until one night the wolf leapt over the fires we had built, believing ourselves safe, and took my steward—killing him before he dragged him off through the fires as if they did not exist.

"I will admit, Prince Elric, that I was near-frozen with terror! Though I had shot arrows at the beast and cut at it with my sword, I had not harmed it. The wounds I made healed immediately. I knew then—and only then, sir—that I was dealing with no natural animal."

For a little while Esbern Snare inched his way along the path, to keep circulation and in the hope of reaching a better thoroughfare before nightfall. When next they took breath, he concluded his story.

"I continued to track the beast, though I believe it thought itself free of pursuit—perhaps deliberately killing my steward, not because it was hungry,

but because it wished to be rid of our company. Indeed, I found most of his remains a day later and was surprised to discover that what I assumed to be some human traveler had helped itself to the dead man's effects, though the clothes, of course, were too bloody and torn to be of use.

"I grew so angry and greedy for revenge that I could no longer sleep. Unrested and yet untired now, I kept up a steady pursuit until one night, under a three-quarter moon, I came upon a human camp. It was a woman who camped there. I watched her through the trees, too cautious to announce myself, yet ready to defend her if the wolf attacked. Now, to my concern, I saw that she had two small children with her, a boy and a girl, both clad in a mixture of animal hides and a miscellany of other garments, who were eating soup from a pot she had built over her fire. The woman looked weary and I assumed she was fleeing from some brutish husband, or that her village had been destroyed by raiders—for we were now on the borderland between the Northern people and the Easterners, those cruel nomads who are without Christian religion nor any pagan honesty. Yet something in me still kept me back. I realized at length that I was using her as a lure—as bait for the wolf. Well, the wolf did not come, and as I watched I took note of everything within that camp, until I saw the great wolfskin which hung upon the tree under which she slept with her children, and I took it for some kind of charm, some way in which the wolf could be resisted. So I watched another day and another night, following the woman up towards the far mountains, where the savage Eastern nomads roamed, and I thought to warn her of her danger, yet it was becoming gradually clear to me that she was not the one who was in danger. Her movements were sure, and she cared for her children with the air of someone who had long lived a wild life beyond the very outposts of civilization. I admired her. She was a good-looking woman and the way she moved made me forget my marriage oath. Perhaps, too, I watched her for that reason. I began to feel a sense of power in this observation, this secret knowledge of her. I know now that I did, indeed, possess a kind of power which only those of her like might possess and those were the only creatures whose presence she could not detect. Had another been with me, she would have known at once.

"It was on the night of the full moon that I saw her take out the folded wolfskin and drape it around her shoulders, saw her drop to all fours and in a bewildering instant stand, growling faintly at the children to stay close to the fire, looking out into the night, an enormous wolf. Yet still she did not see me, did not scent me. I was invisible to her supernatural senses. She moved off towards the mountains and was back at noon that next day with a kill, some nomad boy, probably a herder, and two lambs, which she had dragged, using the boy's body as a kind of sledge. The human remains she left for herself, but assumed her woman form once she had brought the lambs into camp. These she prepared for her children. Later that evening, as they ate the rich-smelling stew she had cooked, she returned to her human kill and devoured a good deal

of him, almost certainly in wolf shape. I was too cautious to get closer to her.

"By now, of course, I understood that the woman was a werewolf. A werewolf of special ferocity, since she had two human cubs to feed. These little creatures were innocent children and had no lycanthropic taint. My guess was that she had taken to this life from desperation, in order that her children should not starve. Yet this had meant other children would starve and more would die, merely to sustain her brood, so my sympathy was limited. As soon as she slept that night, glutted with food, I gathered the courage to sneak into the camp, tear the wolfskin from the tree and make my way back into the forest.

"She awakened almost immediately, but now that I possessed the skin, with which she transformed herself into an invincible beast, I knew I was safe. From the shadows I spoke to her. 'Madam, I have the frightful thing you have used to kill my friends and their families. It will be burned outside the church of Kallundborg when I return! I would not kill a mother before her own children, so while you are with them you are safe from my vengeance. I bid thee farewell.'

"At which the poor creature began to wail and scream—quite unlike the self-possessed mother who had cared for her young in the wild. But I would not listen to her. I knew she must be punished. What I did not know then, of course, was how cruel her punishment would be. 'Do you understand how I must survive if you take away my skin?' she asked. 'Aye, madam, I do,' said I. 'But you must suffer those consequences now. There is meat enough for several days in your pot—and a little meat left outside your camp, which I do not think you are too squeamish to use. So farewell again, madam. This evil thing will be burning soon upon a Christian pyre.'

" 'You must have pity,' she said, 'for you are of my blood. Few can change as I can change—as you can change. Only you could steal that skin. I knew that I should fear you more. Yet I spared you, for I recognized my kindred. Would you not, sir, show loyalty to our common blood and spare my children their unthinkable fate?'

"But I listened no more and I left. As I went away she set up a terrible wailing and howling—a screaming and begging—a bestial, horrible whining—as she called out for her only means of any dignity, any vestige of humanity. That is the final irony of the Undead—that they cling to such shreds of human pride—cling to the memory of the very thing they have bartered in order to become what they have become! Surely the worst fate, I thought, that a werewolf could know. But there are worse fates than that, sir—or at least refinements on them. I left that wolf-woman howling and slavering—already a maddened wretch. It was almost impossible to imagine such agony as she already expressed, let alone imagine the pain to come.

"Oh, well, sir, the story's the usual miserable tale of folly and expediency you know so well. Trapped by the winter of the Eastern wastes, I resorted to using the skin myself. By the time I returned to Kallundborg I was

wedded to it more powerfully than I was wedded to my sweetheart and my wife, Helva of Nesvek. I sought religious help and found only horror at my tale. Thus I left to wander the world, seeking some salvation, some means of returning to the past I had known, of being reunited with my darling. More unearthly adventures befell me, sir, from Sphere to Sphere, and then I learned that the troll itself sought vengeance and tricked some cleric, some visiting bishop, into a bargain that brought down the whole cathedral while the larger part of the population, my wife among them, prayed for my lost soul …

"That is what Gaynor promised to tell me—the fate of my wife. And that is why I weep now, sir, so long after the event."

Elric could find no words of reply and none of consolation for this good man cursed to rely for his only existence upon that horrible skin, forced to perform the most inhuman acts of evil savagery or go forever into nothingness, never to be united with his lost love, even in death.

Perhaps it was not therefore surprising that Elric fingered the pommel of his hellsword and thought deeply upon his own relationship with the blade and saw in poor Esbern Snare a fate more terrible than his own.

The next time he extended a generous hand to the grey man as he stumbled through the twilight, there was a peculiar sense of kinship in the gesture. Slowly, the two whose stories were so different, and whose fates were so similar, continued their progress along that narrow ridge of rock above the sinister whisper of water as it cut its way through the snows of the ravine.

CHAPTER FIVE

Detecting Certain Hints of the Higher Worlds; A Convention of the Patrons and the Patronized; Sacrifice of the Sane and Good.

Prince Gaynor the Damned paused upon the rocky slopes of the last mountain and peered across a waste of scrub grass towards a far distant range. "This land seems all mountains," he said. "Perhaps, however, that is the rim of the far shore? The sisters must be close. We could scarcely miss them on this barren plain."

They had eaten the last of their food and still had seen no signs of animals on earth or in the sky.

"It's as if it never had inhabitants," said Esbern Snare. "As if life has been exiled from this plain completely."

"I've seen such sights before," Elric told him. "They make me uncomfortable—for it can be a sign that Law has conquered everything or that Chaos rules, as yet unmanifested …"

They agreed that they had all shared such experiences, but now Gaynor grew even more impatient, exhorting them to make better speed towards the mountains, "lest the sisters take ship from the farther shore," but Esbern Snare, sustained neither by whatever hellish force fed Gaynor nor by the dragon venom which Elric used, grew hungry and began to fall back, fingering the bundle he carried, and sometimes Elric thought he heard him slavering and growling to himself and when he turned once to enquire, he looked into eyes of purest suffering.

When they broke camp next morning, Esbern Snare, the Northern Werewolf, was gone, succumbing to the temptation which had already destroyed any hope that was ever in him. Twice, Elric thought he heard a mournful howling which was echoed by the mountains and so impossible to trace. Then, once more, there was nothing but silence.

For a day and a night, Elric and Gaynor exchanged not one word but marched in a kind of dogged trance towards the mountains. With the following dawn, however, they found that the plain was rising slightly, in a gentle hill, beyond which they thought they could detect the faintest sounds of a settlement, perhaps even a large town.

Gaynor, in good spirits, clapped Elric upon the back and said, almost jauntily, "Soon, friend Elric, we shall both have what we seek!"

And Elric said nothing, wondering what Gaynor would do if, by some strange chance, they both sought the same thing—or, at least, the same container. And this made him think of the Rose again and he mourned the loss of her.

"Perhaps we should determine the exact nature of our quest," he said, "lest we are unprepared when we eventually meet the sisters."

Gaynor shrugged. He turned his helm towards Elric and his eyes

seemed less troubled than they had been of late. “We do not seek the same thing, Elric of Melniboné, of that you can be assured.”

“I seek a rosewood box,” said Elric bluntly.

“And I seek a flower,” said Gaynor carelessly, “that has bloomed since time began.”

They were close to the brow of the hill now and had almost reached it when the earth was suddenly shaken by an enormous booming which threatened to throw them off their balance. Again came the great reverberant noise. Seemingly some vast gong was being struck, and struck again, until Elric was covering his ears, while Gaynor had fallen to one knee, as if pressed to the ground by a gigantic hand.

Ten times in all the great gong sounded, but its reverberations continued, almost endlessly, to shake the crags of the surrounding mountains.

Able to move forward again, Elric and Gaynor reached the top of the hill to stare upwards at the enormous construction which, both could have sworn, had not been there even a moment before. Yet here it was in all its solid and complicated detail, a network of wooden gantries and monstrous cogs, all creaking and groaning and turning with slow precision, while metal whirled and flashed within—copper and bronze and silver wires and levers and balances, forming impossible patterns, peculiar diffractions—revealing the thousands of human figures toiling upon this vast framework, turning the handles, walking the treadmills, carrying the sand or the pails of water up and down the walkways, balancing between pegs which were carefully placed to maintain some delicate internal equilibrium, and the whole thing shuddering as if it must fall at any moment and send every naked man, woman and child who worked perpetually upon it to their immediate destruction. At the very top of this tower was a large globe which Elric thought at first must be of crystal but then he realized it consisted entirely of the strongest ectoplasmic membrane he had ever seen—and he guessed at once what the membrane imprisoned, for there was scarcely a sorcerer on Earth who had not sought its secret …

Gaynor, too, understood what the membrane contained and it was clear he feared what must soon be revealed as that vast, unearthly skeleton-clock measured off the moments and a humorous voice spoke casually from nowhere.

“See, my little treasures, how Arioch brings time to a timeless world? Merely one of the small benefits of Chaos. It is my homage to the Cosmic Balance.”

And his laughter was hideous in its easy cruelty.

The immense clock clicked and clattered, whirred and grunted, and the structure trembled, shivering with every movement, while from within the globular membrane at the very top, which turned and shook with the passing of each second, an angry eye occasionally appeared, while a fanged mouth raged in supernatural silence and claws, fiercer than any dragon’s, flashed and

scratched and tore, but never with effect, for the entity was trapped within the most powerful prison known in, below or beyond the Higher Worlds. The only entity Elric knew which required such bonds to hold it was a Lord of the Higher Worlds!

Now Gaynor, realizing the same thing at the same time, took steps backwards and looked about him, as if he might find some sudden refuge, but there was none and Arioch laughed the louder at his dismay. "Aye, little Gaynor, your silly strategies have gained you nothing. When will you all learn that you have neither the resources nor, indeed, the character required to gamble against the gods, even such petty gods as myself and Count Mashabak here?" The laughter was richer now.

This was what Gaynor had feared. His master, the only creature capable of protecting him against Arioch, had lost whatever engagement had taken place between them. And this meant, too, that Sadric's attempt to cheat his patrons of their tribute might also have failed.

Yet Gaynor had lost too much already, faced too much horror, contemplated too many repellent fates, caused and observed too much suffering, to show any distress of his own. He drew himself up, his hands folded before him, and lowered his helmeted head in the slightest of acknowledgments. "Then I must call thee master now, Lord Arioch," he said.

"Aye. Always thy true master. Always the master concerned for his slaves. I take a great interest in the activities of my little humans, for in so many ways their ambitions and dreams mirror those of the gods. Arioch was ever the Duke of Hell most mortals turn to when they have need of Chaos's ministrations. And I love thee. But I love the folk of Melniboné most, and of these I love Sadric and Elric most of all."

And Gaynor waited, his helm still slightly bowed, as if expecting some doom of singular and exquisite savagery.

"See how I protect my slaves," Arioch continued, still invisible, his voice moving from one part of the valley to the next, yet always intimate, always amused. "The clock sustains their lives. Should any one of them, old or young, for a moment fail in their specific function, the whole structure will collapse. Thus do my creatures learn the true nature of interdependence. One peg in the wrong socket, one pail of water in the wrong sluice, one false step upon a treadmill, one hesitant hand upon a lever, and all are destroyed. To continue to live, they must work the clock, and each creature is responsible for the lives of all the rest. While my friend Count Mashabak up there would not, of course, be greatly harmed, there would be a certain pleasure for me in watching his little prison rolling about at random amongst the ruins. Do you see your ex-master, Gaynor? What was it he told you to seek?"

"A flower, master. A flower that has lived for thousands of years, since it was first plucked."

"I wonder why Mashabak would not tell me that himself. I am pleased with thee, Gaynor. Wouldst thou serve me?"

"As thou wishest, master."

"Sweet slave, I love thee again! Sweet, sweet, obedient slave! Oh, how I love thee!"

"And I love thee, master," came Gaynor's bitter response—a voice that had known millennia of defeat and frustrated longing. "I am thy slave."

"My slave! My lovely slave! Wouldst thou not remove thine helm and reveal thy face to me?"

"I cannot, master. There is nothing to reveal."

"As thou art nothing, Gaynor, save for the life I permit in thee. Save for the forces of the pit which empower thee. Save for the all-consuming greed which informs thee. Wouldst thou have me destroy thee, Gaynor?"

"If it pleases thee, master."

"I think you should work for a while upon the clock. Would you serve me there, Gaynor? Or would you continue your quest?"

"As it pleases thee, Lord Arioch."

Elric, sickened by this, found himself full of a peculiar self-loathing. Was it his fate, also, to serve Chaos as thoroughly as Gaynor served it—without even the remains of self-respect or will? Was this the final price one paid for all bargains with Chaos? And yet he knew his own doom was not the same, that he was still cursed with a degree of free will. Or was that merely an illusion with which Arioch softened the truth? He shuddered.

"And Elric, would you work upon the clock?"

"I would destroy thee first, Lord Arioch," said the albino coolly, his hand upon the hilt of his hellsword. "My compacts with thee are of blood and ancient inheritance. I made no special bargain of my soul. 'Tis others' souls, my lord, I dedicate to thee."

He sensed within himself now some strength which even the Duke of Hell could not annihilate—some small part of his soul which remained his own. Yet, also, he saw a future where that tiny fragment of integrity could dissipate and leave him as empty of hope and self-respect as Gaynor the Damned …

His glance at the ex-Prince of the Universal held no contempt—only a certain understanding and affinity with the wretched creature Gaynor had become. He was but a step away from that ultimate indignity.

There came a kind of thin screech from the ectoplasmic prison and Count Mashabak seemed to take some small pleasure in his rival's discomfort.

"Thou art my slave, Elric, make no mistake," purred the Chaos Lord. "And will ever remain so, as all your ancestors were mine …"

"Save one before me," Elric said firmly. "The bargain was broken by another, Lord Arioch. I have inherited no such thing. I told thee, my lord—when thou aidest me, I giveth thee the immortal plundering to thyself—souls like these, who worketh thine clock. These, great Duke of Hell, I do not begrudge thee, neither am I sparing in the numbers I allot thee. Without my summoning, as thou knowest, it is all but impossible for any Lord of the

Higher Worlds to get to *my* world and upon that world I am the most powerful of all mortal sorcerers. Only I have the native powers to call to thee across the dimensions of the multiverse and provide a psychic path which thou canst follow. That thou knowest. That is why I live. That is why thou aideth me. I am the key which one day Chaos hopes to turn and open wide all the doors throughout the unconquered multiverse. That is my greatest power. And, Lord Arioch, it is mine to use as I desire, to bargain with as I choose and with whom I choose. It is my strength and my shield against all supernatural fierceness and threatening demands. I accept thee as my patron, Noble Demon, but not as my master."

"These are just silly words, little Elric. Wisps of dandelion on the summer breeze. Yet here you are, through no decision of your own. And here I am, by determined effort, exactly where I wish to be. Which freedom seems the best to you, my poorly pigmented pet?"

"If you are saying, Lord Arioch, would I rather be myself or thyself, I must still say that I would be myself; for perpetual Chaos must be as tedious as perpetual Law, or any other constant. A kind of death. I believe I still have more to relish of the multiverse than hast thou, Sir Demon. I still live. I am still of the living."

And from within the helm of Prince Gaynor the Damned came a great groan of anguish, for he, like Esbern Snare, was neither of the living nor the dead.

Then, sitting astride the ectoplasmic ball in which Count Mashabak squatted and glared, there appeared the naked, golden image of a handsome youth, a dream of fair Arcadia, whose goodness was sweeter than honey, whose beauty was richer than cream, and whose wicked eyes, delirious with cruelty, flashed the appalling lie for everything unholy and perverse that it was.

It giggled.

Arioch giggled. Then grinned. Then made water over the bulging membrane, as his helpless rival, engorged with the psychic energies of a hundred suns, raged and shouted from within, as helpless as a weasel in a snare.

"*Mad Jack Porker ran the cripple down again; seized him by the brain, they said; didn't stop till he was dead … Greedy Porker, Greedy Porker, hung him by his humpo-storker … Sit still, my dear count, while I take my comforts, sir, I pray you. You are an ill-mannered demon, sir. I always said so … Hee, hee, hee … Do you smell cheese, sir? Would you have a piece of ice about you, Jim? Hee, hee, hee …*"

"As I believe I observed earlier," said the albino prince to the still-cowed Gaynor, "the most powerful of beings are not necessarily the most intelligent, nor, indeed, sane, nor well-mannered. The more one knows of the gods, the more one learns this fundamental lesson …" He turned his back upon Arioch and his clock, trusting that his patron demon did not decide,

upon a whim, to extinguish him. He knew that while he protected that tiny spark of self-respect within him, nothing could destroy him in spirit. It was his own thing; what some would have called his immortal soul.

Yet with every movement and every word he trembled and weakened, wanting to cry out that he was no more than Arioch's creature, to do his master's every bidding and be rewarded by his master's every bounty: and, even so, be struck down, as he might be struck now, on a chance change of his master's mood.

For this was the other thing that Elric knew; that to compromise with Tyranny is always to be destroyed by it. The sanest and most logical choice lay always in resistance. This knowledge gave Elric his strength—his profound anger at injustice and inequality—his belief, now that he had visited Tanelorn, that it was possible to live in harmony with mortals of all persuasions and remain vital and engaged with the world. These things he would neither sell nor offer for sale and, in refusing to give himself up wholly to Chaos, it meant he bore his weight of crimes upon his own conscience and must live, night and day, with the knowledge of what and whom he had killed or ruined. This, he guessed, was a weight that Gaynor had been unable to bear. For his part, he would rather bear the weight of his own guilt than the weight that Gaynor had chosen.

He turned again to look up at that obscene clock, Arioch's cruel joke upon his slaves, upon his conquered rival, and every atom of his deficient blood cried out against such casual injustice, such delight in the terror and misery of others, such contempt for everything that lived within the multiverse, including itself; such cosmic cynicism!

"Have you brought me thy father's soul, Elric? Where is that which I told thee to find, my sweet?"

"I seek it still, Lord Arioch." Elric knew that Arioch had not yet established his rule across this whole realm and that his hold upon his new territory must still be tenuous. This meant that Arioch had nothing like the power he possessed in his own domain, where only the most crazed sorcerer would ever consider venturing. "And when I find it, I shall give it up to my father. Then, I would say, the rest is between yourself and him."

"You are a brave little stoat, my darling, now that you are no longer in my kingdom. But this one shall soon be mine. All of it. Do not anger me, darling pale one. *Soon the time will come when thou shalt serve mine every command!*"

"Possibly, great Lord of Hell, but meanwhile that time is not here. I make no further bargains. And I believe that thou wouldst as readily keep our old bargain as have none at all."

A growl of rage escaped Lord Arioch as he pummeled at the ectoplasmic prison with his fists, while Count Mashabak screamed with insane laughter from within. The Duke of Hell looked down upon the labouring thousands, each one of whom maintained, only by the most accurate

and mechanical rhythms, the lives of its fellows, and he smirked, threatening with a pointed, golden finger to poke at one of the little figures and so bring the whole complicated structure to collapse.

Then he looked up at where Gaynor the Damned stood, unmoving, as he had been for some time. "Find me that flower and I will make you a Knight of Chaos, immortal nobility, ruling in our name a thousand kingdoms!"

"I will find the flower, great duke," said Gaynor.

"We shall make an example of thee, Elric," said Arioch. "Even now. By conquering thee, I shall establish Chaos fully upon this plane." And one golden hand stretched suddenly, longer and longer, larger and larger, towards Elric's face. But the albino had drawn his runesword with all the rapid skill of years and the great battle-blade roared out a challenge and a threat to all the myriad denizens of the Lower, Middle and Higher Worlds, to come to it, to cast themselves upon it, to feed it and its master, for this thing was not an owned thing at all, but had become, if it had not always been, an independent force whose sole loyalty was to its own existence, yet was as dependent upon Elric's wielding it as Elric was dependent upon its energy for his own survival. This unholy symbiosis, more profoundly mysterious than the wisest philosophers could fathom, was what made Elric the chosen child of Fate and it was what had, in the end, robbed him of his happiness.

"This must not be!" Arioch pulled back in thwarted anger. "Force must not fight force! Not yet. Not yet."

"There is more than Law and Chaos at work in the multiverse, my lord," said Elric calmly, the sword still held before him, "and more than one of these is thine enemy. Do not anger me too much."

"Ah, most dangerous and courageous of my souls, thou art truly fitted to be my chosen mortal above all the others, ruling in my name, with my power. Whole worlds would be thine, Elric—whole Spheres to mould to thy every whim. All pleasure can be thine. All experience. And unendingly. Without price or consequence. Eternal pleasure, Elric!"

"I have made myself clear, already, Lord Duke, on the subject of perpetuality. It could be that one day in the future I shall determine that my fate lies wholly with thee. But until that time …"

"I shall attack thy memory. That I *can* do!"

"Only in some ways, Lord Arioch. Never in dreams. In my dreams, I recall everything. But with this pell-mell twirling from plane to plane and Sphere to Sphere, the worlds of memory and dreams become confused with the worlds of reality and immediacy. Aye, you can attack my mind, my lord. But not my soul's memory."

Which set insane Count Mashabak to cackling again. "*Gaynor!*" His wild eyes caught sight of his former servant. "*Free me from this and thy reward will be tenfold what I promised.*"

"Death," said Gaynor suddenly. "Death, death, death is all I'm greedy for. And that you all deny me!"

"Because we value thee, dear one …" said the honey-sweet boy, lifting its head and chittering, like a startled wren. "I am Chaos. I am everything. I am the Lord of the Non-Linear, Captain of the *Random Particle* and Entropy's greatest celebrant! I am the wind from nowhere and I am the drowner of worlds; I am the Prince of Infinite Possibility! What glorious changes shall bloom upon the face of the multiverse, what unlikely and perverse marriages shall be sanctified by hell's priesthood, and what wonders and pleasures there will be, Elric! Nothing predictable. The only true justice in the multiverse—where all, even the gods, are subject to random birth and random annihilation! To banish Resolution and have instead eternal Revolution. A multiverse in permanent, gorgeous Crisis!"

"I fear I have spent too long with the gentler folk of the Young Kingdoms," said Elric softly, "to be much tempted by thy promises, my lord. Nor can I say I am much feared of thy threats. Prince Gaynor and myself are upon a quest. If we are to be of service to one another, sir, then I propose you let us continue upon that quest."

At which Arioch shifted his beautiful rump upon the yielding globe and said pettishly, "The damned one can go on his way. As for thee, recalcitrant servant, I cannot punish thee directly, but I can hamper thy quest until this more trustworthy servant achieves his end—whereupon I shall promise him far more than Mashabak promised him. I shall promise him a true death."

There came a sob from within Gaynor's peculiar helm and he fell to his knees, perhaps in gratitude.

Now Arioch raised a golden hammer in either fist and his youthful features were ablaze with glee as he brought first one hammer and then another down upon the yielding surface of the ectoplasmic womb, and with each blow came an unlikely booming, like that of a great gong, while within the prison Count Mashabak clapped scaly claws to his asymmetrical ears and howled in fearsome silence, as if whole universes were in anguish.

"It is the Time," cried Arioch. "It is the Time!"

Down falls Elric, screaming, with his hands, too, upon his ears. And Gaynor goes down, crawling and shrieking in a voice so high-pitched it sounds above the booming of the hammers.

And then there is a low whistling and Elric feels his substance being sucked away, bit by bit, from this plane to another. And he tries to fight against that force which only a Duke of Hell would use, since it damages whole histories and peoples with the violence of the dimensional rupturing, but he is helpless and his runesword will not help him. Stormbringer seems glad to leave that lifeless plane; it needs to feed on living souls and Arioch had offered it not a morsel from his store.

Yet, even as he watches the monstrous clock shimmer and grow misty to his sight, even as Gaynor's mysterious armour becomes faintly outlined against a fainter landscape, the albino sees a huge grey shape loping towards

him, the red tongue lolling, the grey-green eyes glaring, the white fangs clashing in its ferocious head, and he knows that it is the hungered werewolf, become so maddened by its lack of food that it is ready to risk even Stormbringer's edge!

But then it has turned, sniffing, its savage mouth grinning and the hot saliva showering from its jaws, the ears laid first forward, then laid back, and it seems to curve in mid-air, a single fluid motion, and direct its great body straight upwards to where Lord Arioch giggles, then squeals in genuine surprise as Esbern Snare buries his fangs in the throat of one he recognizes as his true tormentor.

So startled was Arioch, and so sparing now of his remaining powers upon this plane, that he could neither change his shape nor did he wish to flee —for by fleeing he would leave his captured rival, who might then be freed, and that he could not bear. So he struggled upon the swaying clock while the damned souls below worked frantically to correct every unpredictable motion of the thing, and the last Elric saw of Esbern Snare was his wolf body burning with a fierce, red-gold light as if he gave up, with selfless joy, his last few embers of life.

Then Elric saw the ectoplasmic sphere topple and fall towards the earth, with Arioch and Esbern Snare still locked together in conflict, and something flared and a darkness poured in upon him and swallowed him up and carried him relentlessly through the broken walls of a thousand dimensions, every one of which lifted a separate voice in protest; every one of which exploded with a different angry colour. He was propelled through the multiverse with almost the last remaining energy Arioch had been able to summon upon that plane.

That was what Esbern Snare had known and that was why he had awaited this opportunity to help his companions.

For Esbern Snare was, indeed, a man of rare goodness and sanity. He had lived too long in thrall to an evil power. He had seen all that he valued destroyed because of it. So, though he could not reclaim his immortal soul, he could ensure himself at least an immortal memorial, some action to ensure that his name, and the name of the love he could never find again, would be

forever linked in the tales told amongst the realms, in all the various futures which lay ahead.

Thus did Esbern Snare the Northern Werewolf redeem his honour, if not his soul.

BOOK THREE

A ROSE REDEEMED; A ROSE REVIVED

Three swift swords for the sisters three;
The first shall be of ivory;
The second sword's forged of rarest gold;
The third shall be cut from a granite fold.

The first sword's name is 'Just Old Man';
And the second is called 'The Urgent Brand';
While the third thirsty sword of that glamour'd three
Is the hungry blade named 'Liberty'.
—Wheldrake,
Border Ballads

CHAPTER ONE

Of Weapons Possessed of Will; A Family Reunion; Old Friends Found; A Quest Resumed.

NOW ELRIC FOUGHT to resist the force of Arioch's rage; stretching out his left hand as if to grasp at the fabric of time and space and slow his rush through the dimensions; clinging to his runesword while it howled and gibbered in his right hand, itself insane with mysterious supernatural anger at the Lord of Hell who had expended the last of his temporal energy on this plane in one final act of petty, and passing, vengeance. For Arioch had proved himself as whimsical as any other denizen of Chaos, willing to destroy all hoped-for futures in order to satisfy a momentary irritation. Which was why Chaos could be trusted no better than Law (which was inclined to permit similar actions, but in the name of principles whose purpose and point were frequently long-forgotten, creating as much mortal misery in the name of Intellect as Chaos wrought in the name of Sensibility).

Such thoughts were available to the albino, as he was flung through the radiantly pierced barriers of the multiverse—*for almost an eternity*—because, when eternity eludes the consciousness, then soon all which that consciousness knows is the singular agony of an expectation never *quite* fulfilled. Eternity is the end to time; the end to the suffering of anticipation; it is the beginning of life, of life unbounded! And thus Elric sought to embrace the beauty and the psychic grace of that perfect promised multiverse, perpetually in a state of transformation, between Life and Death, between Law and Chaos—accepting all, loving all, protecting all—that state of forever-changing societies, natural intelligences, benign supernature, evolving realities, forever relishing their own and others' differences, all in harmonious anarchy—that natural state, the wise ones knew, of each and every creature in each and every world, and which some imagined as a single omniscient entity, as the perfect Sum of Entirety.

Human love, thought the albino, as universe upon universe engulfed and expelled him, is our only constancy, the only quality with which we may conquer the inescapable logic of Entropy. And at that the sword trembled in his hand and seemed to be trying to twist free, almost as if it were disgusted by such sentimental altruism. But Elric clung to the blade as his only reality, his only security in this wildness of ruptured time and space, where the meaning of colour became profound and the meaning of sound unfathomable.

Again it wrenched at his grasp so that he must hold tighter to the quillons as the hellsword began to take its own determined course through the dimensions. It was at this point that Elric grew to respect the extraordinary power which dwelled within the black blade, of a power which seemed born of Chaos yet which had loyalty neither to Chaos nor to Law—yet neither did it serve the Balance—of a power so thoroughly a thing of itself that it required few outward manifestations and yet which might be the profound opposite of everything Elric valued and fought to create—as if some warring force were symbolized by this ironic bond between yearning idealist and cynical solipsist, a force, perhaps, which might be discovered in most thinking creatures, and which found over-dramatic resolution in the symbiosis between Stormbringer and the Last Lord of Melniboné …

Now the albino flew behind the runesword as it carved a path for itself

—almost as if it drove back against Arioch's power, refusing the consequences not from any emotion Elric could understand, but to prove some principle as thoroughly upheld as any perhaps less mysterious principles of Law, almost as if it sought to correct some obscene malformation in the fabric of the cosmos, some event which it refused to permit …

Now Elric was caught up in a kind of intradimensional hurricane, in which a thousand reverses occurred within his brain at once and he became a thousand other creatures for an instant, and, where he lived through more than ten other lives; a fate only minimally different from the one that was familiar to him and so vast did the multiverse become, so unthinkable, that he began to go mad as he attempted to make sense of just a fraction of what laid siege to his sanity and he begged the sword to rest, to pause in its complex flight, to spare him.

But he knew that the sword considered him secondary to its chief concern, which was to re-establish itself at the point it felt was *right* for it in the multiverse … Perhaps it was an impulse no more conscious than instinct …

Elric's senses multiplied and became changed.

There was a sweet, calm sound of roses while his father's music flooded his arteries with bewildered sadness … with excruciating anxiety … as if to let him know that the time was almost over when Sadric had any choice but to seek out his son's soul and join it with his own …

At which the howling runesword gave up a bellow of resistance, as if this, too, attacked its own ambitions and the logic of its own unreasoning determination to survive without compromise with any other entity in the multiverse—even, ultimately, Elric who must be extinguished, as soon as he had fulfilled his final destiny, which at present was known to no-one, even the runesword, which did not live in any past, present or future understood by creatures of the Lower, Middle or Higher Worlds; yet it wove a pattern of its own, calling upon vaster energies than any Elric had witnessed, than any it had ever been required to utilize in giving aid to him in return for the souls not apportioned to Arioch …

"*Elric!*"

"*Father, I fear I have lost thy soul …!*"

"*My soul shall never be lost to thee, my son …*"

A bright and sudden gleam of hard, pink-gold light, like a weapon against his eyes, and a smack of freezing air against his flesh, and a rhythmic sound, so familiar, so wonderful to him, that he felt the hot tears fall once, then twice, upon his chilled cheeks …

"*So Gaynor rode to The Ship That Was*,
And made of it his own,
And three sisters rare he did ensnare,
To insure the Chaos Throne.

The first of these sisters was The Unfolded Flower,
The second was Duty's Bud,
While the third-born they christened Secret Thorn
And her bower was built of blood."

And, sobbing, Elric fell into the welcoming arms of that great-hearted, if dwarfish, poet, Master Ernest Wheldrake. "My dear, good, sir! My good, old friend! Greetings to thee, Prince Elric. Does something pursue thee?" And he pointed back up through the deep snow-banks terracing the valley wall, where a fresh-ploughed furrow ran, as if Elric had slid from the top of the cliff to the bottom.

"I am glad to see thee, Master Wheldrake." He brushed caked snow from his clothing, wondering, not for the first time, if he had dreamed his journey through the multiverse or if the dragon venom, perhaps, possessed more than restorative qualities. He glanced across the fresh-trod snow of a small clearing in the winter birchwood and saw Stormbringer leaning, almost casually, against a tree, and for a pure, clear moment, he knew absolute hatred of the blade, that part of himself he could no longer exist without or (as some small voice continued to tell him) that part, perhaps, that he wished to keep alive, since only in the rage of supernatural battle did he ever know any true relief from the burden of his conscience.

With deliberate slowness he strolled to the tree, picked up the blade and sheathed it as a man might sheath any ordinary weapon, his attention still upon his friend's disheveled features. "How came you here, Master Wheldrake? Is it a plane familiar to you?"

"Familiar enough, Prince Elric. And to yourself, I should think. We have not left the realm where flows the Heavy Sea."

And now Elric realized exactly what the Black Sword had done, dragging them both back to the very world from which Arioch had sought to banish them. And this suggested that the hellblade had motives of its own for ensuring his remaining here. He said none of this to Wheldrake but listened while his friend explained how Charion Phatt was at last reunited with her Uncle Fallogard and her grandmother.

"But Koropith remains lost to us at present," the poet concluded. "Fallogard, however, has a close sense of his son's presence. So we are hopeful, dear prince, that soon all surviving Phatts shall know again the pleasures of family security." He lowered his voice to a kind of conspiratorial squeak. "There is some talk of marriage between myself and my beloved Charion."

And, before he could burst into verse, the snowy branches of a forest path parted and here came the confident Charion, carrying the handles of a litter on which Mother Phatt sat, smiling and nodding, like a queen in a procession, the other end borne by her tall, untidy son who flashed a smile of jolly recognition towards the albino, as one might greet a familiar face at a

local tavern. Only Charion seemed a little disturbed to discover the newcomer. “I sensed your destruction a year ago,” she said quietly, after she had lowered her grandmother’s litter to the ground. “I sensed you blasted out of any recognizable form of existence. How could you have survived that? Are you Gaynor or some shape-changer in Elric’s guise?”

“I assure you, Mistress Phatt,” said Elric, also disturbed, “I am only the one you know. For some reason, Fate does not want me annihilated as yet. It seems, indeed, that I am surviving annihilation rather successfully.”

It was this last little irony that seemed to convince her and she relaxed. But it was clear every psychic sense in her was probing his being for signs of imposture. “You are indeed a remarkable creature, Elric of Melniboné,” said Charion Phatt as she turned away to attend to her grandmother.

“I am glad you found us, sir. We ourselves have some rather excellent intimations concerning my missing son,” called out Fallogard Phatt cheerfully, oblivious of his niece’s suspicions. “So, gradually, we become, as it were, concrete again. You already know, I believe, my niece’s intended?”

At which Charion Phatt blushed girlishly, to her own furious embarrassment, yet the eye she cast upon the little coxcomb was not unlike that which a certain toad had once cast upon her: for there is never anything but apparent paradox in the choices made by lovers.

And Mother Phatt opened her merry red mouth in which a few fangs still glittered and cried: “Ding dong, for the six sad drabs! Ding dong for the dilly-o!” As if, in senility, she had become possessed by a mad parrot. Yet she waved an approving hand upon her granddaughter’s choice and her wink at Elric was full of knowing wit and, when he returned it, he was sure she smiled. “Dark days for the lily-white boy; bright days for the darkling joy! Feast of evil, feast of good, feasting fine the Chaos brood. Feast the devil, feast the Son; dark days for the shining one. For the flowers of the forest are blooming at night, and the ships of the ocean are sailing on land. Ding dong for the lily-white lad, ding dong for the good and the bad; sail through the wildwood, sow grain on the sea; Chaos has come to the Land of the Three.”

But when they taxed her on the meaning, if any, of her rhymes, she merely chuckled and called for her tea. “Mother Phatt is a greedy old woman,” she confided to Elric. “But she’s done her bit in the past, vicar, I think you’ll agree. Mother Phatt sat under a tree; bore five strong sons to Eternity.”

“Koropith, then, is not far from here?” Elric spoke to Fallogard Phatt. “You can sense him, you said, sir.”

“Too much Chaos, you see,” exclaimed the tall clairvoyant with a vigorous nod. “Hard to part it—hard to look through. Hard to call. Hard to hear an answer. Fuzzy, sir. The cosmos is always fuzzy when Chaos goes to work. This world is threatened, sir, you see. The first invaders have long since gained their foothold. Yet something holds them back, it seems.”

Elric thought again of the runesword, yet had the notion that his blade

was neither helping nor resisting the complicated flow of events; it had merely fought to return to the plane on which it must be at a certain time, during a certain movement of the multiverse. Some other power fought Chaos here, of that he was sure. And he wondered about the three sisters and their part in this. That they possessed certain treasures, which both he and Gaynor coveted, was almost all he knew—save for Wheldrake's ballad, which was mostly the poet's own invention and therefore of little use as an objective oracle. Did the sisters exist at all? Were they wholly the creation of the Bard of Putney? Was everyone pursuing a chimera—the invention of a highly romantic and over-coloured imagination?

"In the third grey month on the third grey day,
Three sistren rode to Radinglay,
Seeking three treasures they had lost,
To the laughing lord of The Ship That Was."

"Well, sir," says Elric, helping with the fire they are building, for they had planned to make camp here, even before his sudden arrival, "do those old rhymes of yours give you any clue to the whereabouts of the sisters?"

"I must admit, sir, that I have modified the verses a little, to allow for the new things I have learned, so I am an unreliable source of truth, sir, save in its most fundamental sense. Like a majority of poets, sir. Speaking of Gaynor, we have intimations of him, but none of Master Snare. We were wondering what had become of him."

"He sacrificed himself," said Elric bluntly. "I think he saved me, also, from Arioch's full fury. To the best of my knowledge Arioch was driven from this plane by him—and he died in that act of banishing the Lord of Hell."

"You have lost your ally, then?"

"I have lost an ally, Master Wheldrake, as much as I have lost an enemy. I also appear to have lost a year in this realm. However, I do not mourn the loss of my patron Duke of Entropy …"

"Yet Chaos still threatens," said Fallogard Phatt. "This plane stinks of it. Hovering, as it were, before it devours the entire world!"

"Is it ourselves that Chaos desires?" Charion Phatt wished to know. Her uncle shook his head. "Not us, child. It is not *greedy* for us. We are merely, at present, an irritant to it, I think. No longer useful. But it would be rid of us." He closed his heavily lidded eyes. "It grows angry, I know. There is Gaynor now … See—smell—taste him—Gaynor—feel his presence—see him riding … gone, gone … There he is—riding—I think he seeks the sisters still. And is close to discovering them! Gaynor serves it and himself. A subtle power. They desire to possess it. Without it they can never fully conquer this plane. The sisters—at last—I can sense the sisters. They seek another. Gaynor? Chaos? What is this? An alliance? They seek—not Gaynor, I think … Ah! The Chaos stuff, it is too strong … Mist again. Uncertain mist …" He lifted his head and gasped at the cold twilight air as if he had been close to drowning in that psychic sea on which he was, often, the only

voyager …

"Gaynor rode to the eastern mountains," said Elric. "Are the sisters still there?"

"No," said Fallogard Phatt, frowning. "They have long since left the Mynce and yet—time—Gaynor has gained time—he has been aided in this—is there a trap? What? What? I cannot see him!"

"We must break camp early," said Charion with all her usual practicality, "and try to reach the sisters before Gaynor. Yet our first duty is to family. Koropith is here."

"On this plane?" Elric asked.

"Or one that presently intersects this realm." She broke off a piece of candied leather and offered it to the albino who shook his head, having no love for the sweetmeats of her world where, Wheldrake swore, the taste in food was even worse than in his own. "I wonder," she added, "if anyone but me has any notion of Gaynor's positive will to evil?" And when she looked into the fire, her eyes were hidden from them all.

The snow came softly in the morning, covering the scars they had made behind them, covering the paths ahead, and the world was bitter with cold and silence as they trudged on through the forest, following the line of the cliff-top above and guessing, from thin sunlight, the direction in which they walked—yet they moved without hesitation, doggedly onward, following a psychic scent through this world where they appeared to be the only living creatures. They paused briefly to rest, to tend to Mother Phatt's needs, to boil her warming drinks of the herbs she herself had told them to pick and which were chiefly what they now lived on, together with the sweet jerky Charion carried. Then they were up again and marching where the snow was shallow and Mother Phatt inspected the moss and the bark they brought her and she told them that the realm had been in the grip of winter for more than a year and that this was Chaos work without doubt, and she murmured of old Ice Giants and the Cold Folk and the legends of her mother's people, who had been of the race, she claimed, that came before Man, that had ruled Cornwall before it was named by human tongues. There had been one, then, she said, that was also a prince, and that prince was of the old race, while the woman he married was of the new. The children of that union were her mother's ancestors. "It is why we have so great a gift of the Second Sight," she said to Elric intimately, patting his shoulder as he knelt beside her during one of their brief rests. She spoke to him as she might a favourite grandchild. "And they were not unlike you in appearance, save for the pigment, those folk."

"They were of Melniboné?"

"No, no, no! The word is meaningless. These were the great Vadhagh people who came before the Mabden. So, we are related, perhaps, you and I, Prince Elric?" Her intelligence was undisguised for a moment and complemented her humour. And Elric, looking into that face, thought that he looked into the face of Time itself.

"Are we," she asked him, "both of that Heroic blood?"

"It seems likely, madam," said Elric gently, scarcely aware of what she spoke, but glad to help her ease the burden she carried and which in some ways she appeared to resent.

"And born to bear a greater share of the world's grief, I fear," she said.

At which she began to cackle again, and to sing. "Dingly-dongly-bongly! Old Pim's a-dabbling-o! Ring the rich and lively boy to bleed his heart for May to bloom!" Whereupon she began to beat a kind of savage dirge with her spoon and plate. "Up from the blood and into the brain jumps that memory of pain!"

"O, Ma! O, Loins of my Creation! When Chaos mists so much, your recollection of ancient savageries does further encloud my sight!" Fallogard Phatt spoke with nervous grace and entreating hands.

"They'll gnaw and pick at poor old Ma's few remaining bits of brain." The ancient matron drew upon her store of pathos to charm her son, but he was adamant.

"Ma, we're almost onto Koropith and the going looks to get hard from now on. We must save our energies, Ma! We must hold our tongues and stop the scattering of random charms and jingles or you'll leave a witch-trail behind us to march an army up. Which is never prudent, Ma."

"Prudence never pickled no rats," said Ma Phatt with a reminiscent chuckle, but she obeyed her son. She accepted his logic.

Elric had begun to notice that the air grew warmer and the ice was melting in the trees, while snow fell heavily to mushy ground and was quickly absorbed. By that afternoon, under an intense sun, they had crossed a line of grotesquely armoured beast-men tortured into even stranger shapes and enshrouded in ice which was burning hot to the touch but through which the travelers saw eyes moving, lips straining to speak, limbs frozen in attitudes of perpetual agony. A small Chaos army, Fallogard Phatt had agreed with Elric, defeated by some unknown sorcery, perhaps an effort of Law? Now they rode across a desert through which ran what was almost certainly an artificial watercourse and from which they could drink.

The desert ended by the next day and they saw ahead of them the immense foliage of a dark, lush forest, whose trees bore leaves as long as a man, with trunks as slender and sinewy as human bodies, whose gorgeous foliage was deep scarlets and deep yellows, dusty browns and clouded blues, while mingling with these rich, threatening colours were strands of pale pink and veins of purple or grey, as if the forest was fed by blood.

"It is there, I think, we shall find our missing prodigal!" announced Fallogard Phatt heartily, though even his mother looked doubtfully at that menacing tangle of massive blooms and sinuous branches. There seemed to be no hint of a pathway through it.

But Fallogard Phatt, now at the head of the litter, trotted forward, causing his shorter niece to take quicker steps to maintain the balance and

momentum of their progress, until she cried out for her uncle to stop as he plunged forward into the sticky, almost reptilian forest.

Glad to be in the shade, Elric leaned against a yielding trunk. It was as if he sank into soft flesh. He straightened his back and shifted his weight to his feet. "This is without doubt Chaos work," he said. "I am familiar with these creations, half-animal, half-vegetable, which are usually the first growths Chaos achieves on any world. They are essentially the detritus of unskilled sorceries and no self-respecting emperor of Melniboné would have wasted time on such stuff. But Chaos, as you no doubt have already learned, has very little taste—whereas Law, of course, has rather too much."

They found the forest easier going than they had imagined, for the fleshy branches parted easily and only occasionally did a pod cling sensually to an arm or part of a face, while a glossy green tentacle embraced the body like the arms of a lover. Yet the things were not greatly animated by Chaos-energy and Fallogard Phatt's progress was scarcely ever blocked for long.

Until, without warning, the jungle was no longer organic.

It became crystalline.

Pale light of a thousand shades fell through the prisms of the forest roof, flashed and skipped from branch to crystal leaf, flooded down trunks and across canopies—and still Fallogard Phatt continued his relentless advance through the jungle, for the crystals yielded as easily as had the branches.

"And this is Law's work, surely?" said Charion Phatt to Elric. "This sterile beauty?"

"I would admit—" said Elric studying the way the light fell in multicoloured slabs one upon the other until the forest floor ran with flooding light, like rubies and emeralds and dark amethysts, until they were knee-deep in it, wading on through this wealth of pigment which was also reflected in their skins so that Elric himself was at last one with his friends, for all looked in wondering pleasure at their swirling motley flesh which seemed to glint and dance with the crystals all around them. Then they had reached and entered a mighty cavern of cool, silver radiance—where distant water lapped gentle banks and they knew an intense peace, such as Elric had only known before in Tanelorn.

And it was here that Fallogard Phatt stopped and signed for his niece to lower the litter to the sweet-smelling moss of the cavern floor. "We have entered a zone where neither Law nor Chaos rules—where the Rule of the Balance is undertaken, perhaps. Here we shall find Koropith. Here we shall seek the three sisters."

Then, from somewhere above them, where the cavern roof caught the light of a setting sun and reflected it down to them, they heard a thin, angry shout and a voice calling from a distant gallery:

"Hurry, you idiots! Come up! Come up! Gaynor is here! He has captured the sisters!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Rose Rejoined; Further Familial Joy; Gaynor's Rape Thwarted and the Sisters Found at Last—Still Another Strange Turn of Fate's Wheel.

"Koropith, my heartsease! Oh, my beauty! Oh, my fruit!" Fallogard Phatt peered up through the shafts of intersecting light, through the galleries of green foliage and dark rock, through the richly scented blooms, and stretched slender fingers out for his son.

"Quick, Pa! All of you! Up here! We must not let him succeed!" The boy's voice was clear as a mountain spring. His tone was desperate.

Elric had found steps cut into the cave wall, winding up towards the roof. Without further thought he began to climb these, followed by Fallogard and Charion Phatt who left Wheldrake to protect Mother Phatt.

Through the cool tranquility of that tall cave they climbed and Fallogard Phatt, panting, observed that the place was like a natural cathedral, "as if God had placed it here as an example to us" (by disposition and background he was a monotheist) and had it not been for his son's urgent cries from above he would have paused to observe the beauty and the wonder of it.

"There he is! There's two of 'em, now!" cries Wheldrake cryptically from below. "You're almost there! Carefully, my delicacy! Look out for her, Pa!"

Charion needed help from no-one. Sure-footed, her sword already in her hand, she followed quickly behind Elric and would have passed him had there been room on the narrow steps.

They came to a gallery whose wall was made of a kind of hedge, growing thickly from the side of the cliff and clearly designed to protect anyone who used the path. Elric wondered at the artistry of the people who had lived here and if any of them had survived the coming of Chaos to their world. If so, where were they?

The gallery widened and became the entrance to a large tunnel.

And there stood Koropith Phatt, gasping with the burning immediacy of his predicament yet weeping to see his father and cousin again. "Quick, Pa! Gaynor will destroy her if we do not hurry! There is some chance he will destroy them all—destroy everyone!"

And he was dashing ahead of them, pausing to make sure they followed, dashing on again, calling. He had gained height and seemed to have lost weight; was turning into a skinny youth, as angular and gangling as his father. Dashing through galleries of green light, through peaceful chambers, through suites of rooms which looked out over the vastness of the cave itself, from windows set cunningly near the roof, and none of them occupied, all of them with a faint air of desolation. Dashing up curving stairways and gracefully sinuous corridors, through a city that was a palace or a palace that was large as a city, where a gentle people had lived in civilized harmony—

—and then comes the sounding of a pair in psychic, supernatural and physical combat—an explosion of orange light, a collapsing of a certain kind of darkness, the swirl of unnatural colours, followed by sounds, as if of a deep, irregular heartbeat—

—and Elric leads the others into a hall that, in its artfulness and delicate architectural intelligence, rivals the great cave below—almost an homage to it …

—and lying upon a floor of pale blue marble shot through with veins of the most subtle silver is the body of a young woman in brown and green, a great shock of pink-gold hair identifying her at once. There is a sword near her unmoving right hand, a dagger still in her left.

"Ah! No!" cries Koropith Phatt in anguish. "She cannot be dead!"

Elric, sheathing Stormbringer, knelt beside her, feeling for a pulse and finding one, faint, steady, in her cool throat just at the moment she opened her lovely hazel eyes and frowned at him. "Gaynor?" she murmured.

"Gone, it seems," said Elric. "And the sisters with him, I think."

"No! I was sure I had protected them!" The Rose made a weak movement of her arms, tried to rise and failed. Koropith Phatt hovered at Elric's shoulder, murmuring and crooning with helpless concern. She gave him a reassuring smile. "I am unharmed," she said. "Merely exhausted …" She drew two quick breaths. "Gaynor has a Lord of Chaos to help him in this, I think. It took all the spells I bought in Oio to resist him. I have little left."

"I did not understand you to be a sorceress as well as a swordswoman," Elric said, helping her to sit.

"Our magic is of a natural order," she said, "but not all of us chose to practise it. Chaos has fewer weapons against it, which proved an advantage to me, though I had hoped to imprison him and learn more from him."

"He is in Count Mashabak's employ still, I think," said Elric.

"That much, sir, I know," said the Rose softly and with a significance only clear to herself.

Soon they had her seated on a cushioned settle, her skin pale pink in the gentle light of the blue hall, her hair folding about her delicate skull like petals.

It was some while, after Koropith had returned with Wheldrake and Mother Phatt, through tunnels easier to climb than the outer steps, before the Rose was ready to tell them what had occurred after she had reached this cave ("slithering through the dimensions like sneak-thieves"). She had found the sisters hidden, having failed in a quest of their own, which had taken them so far afield. Not for the first time she had offered them her aid, and they had been glad to accept it, but some rupturing of the cosmic fabric had been detected by Gaynor, whose own stronghold lay not fifty miles from here, and he had arrived with a small army to seize the sisters and their treasure. He had not expected to be resisted, especially by the singular magic commanded by the Rose, which was of a nature too subtle for Chaos easily to understand.

"My magic draws neither from Law nor from Chaos," she said, "but from the natural world. Sometimes it takes a century for one of our spells to stifle the roots of some spectacular tyranny, but when it is dead, it is thoroughly dead. It was our vocation to seek out tyranny and destroy it. So successful were we that we began to anger certain Lords of the Higher Worlds, who ruled through such people."

"You are the Daughters of the Garden," said Wheldrake, breaking in and then stopping apologetically. "There is an old Persian tale which speaks of you, I think. Or perhaps it is from Baghdad. The Daughters of Justice was another name … But you were Martyred … Forgive me, madam. There was a tale …

"Came cruel Count Malcolm to that land,
With fire and steel in either hand,
And a curse which fouled his breath;
I seek the Flowers of Bannon Brae;
I bring them pain and death.

"Good heavens, madam, sometimes I feel I am trapped in some vast, unending epic of my own invention!"

"You recall the old ballad's ending, Master Wheldrake?"

"There are one or two," said Wheldrake diplomatically.

"You recall a certain ending, however, do you not?"

"I recall it, madam," said Wheldrake in dawning horror. "Oh, madam! No!"

"Aye," said the Rose. And she spoke slowly, with great, weary strength …

"Each brand that burn'd in Bannon Brae,
Was a soul in cruel torment.
Count Malcolm who cut the bright flowers down,
Left but one to sing Lament.

"I," said the Rose, "was the only flower not, eventually, cut down by him whom the ballad calls 'Count Malcolm'. The one whom Gaynor had preceded, with his lies to us concerning his own heroic struggles against the forces of the Dark." And she paused, as if she stilled a tear. "That was how we were caught unawares of the invasion. We trusted Gaynor. Indeed, I spoke for him! He is economical in his methods, I learned. He deceives us all with the same few tales. Our valley was a wasteland within hours. You can imagine the upheavals, for we were unprepared for Chaos, which could only enter our realm through mortal agency. Through Gaynor's agency. And that of the unwitting fools he deceived …"

"Oh, madam!" says Wheldrake again. At which she reaches out a friendly hand to comfort him. But he would comfort her. "The only flower …"

"Save one," she said, "but she resorted to desperate sorcery and died an unholy death …"

"The sisters are not your kinswomen, then?" murmured Fallogard Phatt. "I had assumed …"

"Sisters in spirit, perhaps, though they are not of my vocation. They seek to resist a common enemy, which is why I have aided them until now. For they, among others, possess the key to my own particular goal."

"But where has Gaynor taken them?" Charion Phatt wished to know. "His stronghold is only fifty miles from here, you say?"

"And it is surrounded by a Chaos army awaiting only his order to march against us. But I do not know yet if he has the sisters."

"He took them, surely?" Charion Phatt said.

But the Rose shook her head. Gradually, she was restoring herself and was now able to walk unaided. "I had to hide them from him. There was so little time. I could not hide their treasures with them. But I do not know if I acted swiftly enough."

It was evident she did not want to be asked further questions about that incident, so they asked her and Koropith what had happened on the Gypsy causeway. She told them how she had found Gaynor and the sisters at the very moment Mashabak was about to cut the bridge. He had been summoned, of course, by Gaynor. "I sought to stop Mashabak and save as many lives as I could. But in so doing I allowed Gaynor to escape—though not with the sisters, who had managed to free themselves from him. I had tried to warn the gypsies and when that failed I went in search of Gaynor—or Mashabak. We have come close, Koropith and I, to finding them at different times, but now we know they have returned here, as have the sisters. Chaos gathers strength. This realm is almost theirs, save for the resistance provided by ourselves, and the sisters."

"I have little stomach for a journey to a Court of Chaos, madam," said Wheldrake slowly, "but if I can be of any assistance to you in this matter, please feel free to make use of me however you wish." He offered her a grave little bow.

And Charion, at her intended's side, donated her own sword and wits in the Rose's service.

All of which was accepted graciously but with lifted hand. "We do not yet know what we must do," she said and then she raised herself to her feet, the velvet robe falling in folds upon the marble couch, and, lifting her marvelous head, pursed her lips in a whistle.

There came the sound of padded feet upon those marble floors and a hot panting, as if the Rose had summoned the Hounds of Hell to aid them; then into the hall bounded three huge dogs—great wolf-hounds with lolling red tongues and fangs of pre-human heritage—a white hound, a blue-grey hound and a pale golden hound, ready, it seemed, to do battle with any enemy, pursue any prey. And they grouped at the Rose's side and looked up into her face as if ready to obey her slightest order.

But then one of the dogs glanced to one side and saw Elric.

Immediately it became agitated, growling softly and attracting the attention of the other two hounds, until Elric began to wonder if these were not some close relatives of Esbern Snare who did not approve of the werewolf's act of sacrifice on Elric's behalf.

Next they were up and moving towards the albino while the Rose cried out in surprise; cried for them to return to heel.

But they would not.

Elric did not fear the great hounds as they approached him. Indeed, there was something about them which reassured him. But he was deeply puzzled.

Now they came closer, prowling around him, sniffing, quizzing, with the soft growls forever being exchanged between them until at last they seemed satisfied and returned, passively, to the Rose's side.

The Rose was mystified. "I was about to explain," she said, "why we must wait before we take further action. These hounds are the three sisters. I put a glamour on them to protect them from Gaynor's sorcery, as well as to give them a means of defending themselves, for they are spent, you see, of magic and all ingenuity. They have failed in their quest."

"What was that quest?" asked Elric softly, stepping from behind the others and looking with a new curiosity at the dogs, who returned his gaze

with a kind of abstracted longing.

"It was for thee," said the golden hound as she rose from all fours and in a single flowing motion became a woman clad in silk the colour that her fur had been, and her face was of that long, refined sort which Elric recognized at once as belonging to his own people. Grey-blue fur turned to grey-blue silk, white to white, until all three sisters were standing there before him, tiny figures, yet unmistakably of Melnibonéan stock. "It was for thee, Elric of Melniboné, that we sought," they said again.

They had black hair framing their exquisite features like helmets, large slanting violet eyes, fair skin like the palest brass, their lips were perfect bows —

—and they had spoken to him alone. They had used the old High Speech of Melniboné which even Wheldrake found hard to understand.

Confronted by this unexpected turn of events, Elric had taken an unwitting step backward. Then he steadied himself, bowed briefly and discovered himself, in spite of all he'd ever sworn, making the old blood greeting of the Bright Empire's ruling families. "I am bonded to thee and thine interests …"

"… and we to thine, Elric of Melniboné," said the golden woman. "I am the Princess Tayaratuka and these are my sisters, also of the Caste, Princess Mishiguya and Princess Shanug'a. Prince Elric, we have hunted thee through millennia and across a thousand Spheres!"

"I have hunted thee only a few hundred years and perhaps five hundred Spheres," said Elric modestly, "but it seems I am the tail that chases the weasel …"

"When Mad Jack Porker staked his leg!" cried Ma Phatt from where she enjoyed the luxury of a fresh couch and luxurious linen. "We have been chasing one another in circles, then? See! I knew there was a pattern to it! Somewhere, there is always a pattern to it. Dongle-my-dingle, the lad's lost his jingle. It's the famous race, you know. Porker's Trial by Accident. His last dash was pure heroism. Everyone said so. Ladies and gentlemen, they are nailing our feet to the ground. That is not fair play!" And she relapsed into some comic dialogue with herself in which she relived her girlhood on the boards. "Buffalo Bill and the Wandering Jew! It was our grand finale. The last touch."

To which the three sisters listened with perfect patience before continuing …

"We sought thee to ask of thee a boon," said Princess Tayaratuka, "and to offer thee in exchange for that boon a gift."

"I am bound to thee as if I were thine own hands," said Elric automatically.

"And we to thee," replied the sisters, equally familiar with the ritual.

Then Princess Tayaratuka dropped to one knee, raising her hands to place them on his arms and bring him down to her so that he, too, was

kneeling as she kneeled. “My lord, good power to thee,” she said, and offered her forehead for his kiss. This ritual was performed until all had spoken and been kissed in turn.

“How may I help thee, sisters,” said Elric when they had next kissed the triple kiss of kinship. All his old Melnibonéan blood stirred in him and he grew chill with a longing for his homeland and the speech and customs of his own unhuman folk. These women were his peers; already a deep understanding existed between them, stronger than blood, stronger than love, yet in no way encumbering or demanding. Elric knew in his bones that their command of sorcery might well have been the match of his own, before they exhausted all their strength in their search for him. He had known and loved many powerful women, including his lost betrothed Cymoril, and Myshella, the Dark Lady of Kaneloon, the sorceress he had but lately served, but, save for the Rose, the three princesses were the most striking of all the living women he had yet encountered, since he had left Imrryr as the pyre for his beloved’s corpse.

“I am flattered that you should have sought me, your majesties,” he said, relaxing for good manners’ sake into the common tongue. “How may I be of service to you?”

“We would borrow your sword, Elric,” said Princess Shanug’a.

“Borrow it you shall, madam. And myself to wield it for you.” He spoke gallantly, as honour bade him do, but he still feared the threat of his father’s ghost hovering somewhere not too far off, ready to flee at the first threat of extinction and pour his soul into Elric’s being, to blend for ever … And had not Gaynor coveted the Black Sword?

“You do not ask why we would borrow the blade,” said Princess Mishiguya, seating herself beside the Rose and helping herself to the small fruits which had been placed on the arm of the couch. “You would not bargain with us?”

“I would expect you to help me as I help you,” said Elric in a matter-of-fact tone, “but I have sworn the blood-oath, as have you. It is done. We are the same. Our interests are the same.”

“Yet you have a deep fear in you, Elric,” said Charion Phatt suddenly. “You have not told these women what you fear if you allow yourself to aid them!” She spoke out as a child might, for justice, without understanding why the albino did not wish to betray his own anxieties.

“And they have not told me of what *they* fear if I agree to aid them,” said Elric quietly to the young woman. “We are riding the stallions of terror, every one of us at present, Mistress Phatt, and the best we can hope to do is to keep some kind of grip upon the reins.”

Charion Phatt accepted this and subsided, though she glanced furiously at Wheldrake, as if she wished him to speak on her behalf. But the poet remained a diplomat, unsure of the game he witnessed or of the stakes, but willing to go wherever his almost-betrothed determined.

"Where would you have me bear this blade?" Elric asked again.

Princess Tayaratuka glanced at her sisters before getting their unspoken assent to continue. "We do not need you to bear the blade," she said gently. "We spoke quite literally. We wish to borrow your runesword, Prince Elric. I will explain."

And she told a tale of a world where all lived in harmony with nature. This world had possessed few cities in the usual sense and its settlements were built to conform with the contours of the hills and valleys, the mountains and the streams, to blend with the forest but not to encroach upon it, so that anyone visiting their plane would have seen virtually no signs of habitation upon the continent where they lived. But Chaos came, led by Gaynor the Damned, who sought their hospitality and betrayed it, as he had betrayed so many other souls through the centuries, summoning in his patron lord who had immediately put the marks of Chaos upon their land.

"Few of our habitations were ever visible to potential enemies from other continents, so well-protected were we by the Heavy Sea, which encircles us. So dense were our forests and wide and winding our rivers that no-one cared to risk their lives on seeking after any legends which might have crept to other parts of the world. It is true we lived in paradise. But it was a paradise achieved at the expense of no other creature, including those of the wild, with whom we lived. Yet within a day or two all that had gone and we were left with a few barricaded outposts like this one, where our sorcery was used to maintain our world as it had been before Chaos came."

"And Chaos has laid siege here for a long while, madam?" asked Fallogard Phatt sympathetically, and raised his eyebrows at her answer.

"For something over a thousand years there has been a sort of stalemate. Most of our people left this world to found new settlements in other planes, but some of us felt duty-bound to stay and fight Chaos. We are the last of those. While we sought Elric, many of our kinfolk were killed in forays with Chaos attempting to attack the main stronghold."

"But what achieved the amnesty?" Elric asked.

"A feud between two Dukes of Hell took up their attention, especially after Arioch, employing some complicated strategy which involved Mashabak's cutting of the gypsy bridge and various other machinations and manipulations of the multiverse, was able to capture Mashabak in the territory he considered his own—our realm. Without demonic aid, Gaynor had to hope that the sisters would lead him back here. However, all that is altered. Some event occurred recently which ended the truce, such as it was. Mashabak has returned here and must soon send all his forces against us. Whoever broke that cosmic stalemate robbed us of whatever time we thought we had left …"

And Elric said nothing, remembering Esbern Snare and his leap at the Duke of Hell; remembering the courage of the Northern Werewolf as he had sought to save his friend—and had unwittingly broken the balance of power which had allowed the sisters some respite in their own palace.

Gaynor, insanely determined, abandoned by Mashabak, battled his own way through the dimensions, sworn to reclaim his conquests not in Mashabak's name, but his own! He challenged Chaos as he had once challenged the Balance! To him, no master was tolerable! The ex-Prince of the Universal had been lost, forced to spend years of subjective time searching for a way back to this realm. He had employed every strategy, every trick—furious that his cosmic ally had, apparently, deserted him, but determined to establish his rule here! Eventually he decided that he would follow the sisters, since they must eventually return to their own realm. Originally Mashabak had sent him on a quest—to follow the escaping sisters through the dimensions and bring back the living rose. But when Mashabak no longer aided him, the rose had become secondary to Gaynor. He desired Elric's sword rather more urgently.

Now he had returned, and demonstrated that the palace was no longer proof against him. He had entered and threatened the sisters at sword-point, demanding their now-legendary Three Treasures which they had carried back with them to return to the one who had loaned them. Gaynor's plan was to force the sisters out of the palace and into the cavern, at the eastern entrance of which his Chaos pack waited, unable themselves to enter that unlikely place.

With Koropith Phatt's skills stretched to snapping, and almost overwhelmed by a desperate urgency as the young Phatt sensed the sisters' danger, the Rose at last broke through into this realm—barely in time to place a protective glamour on the sisters and challenge Gaynor, whom she drove back into the palace by her sword-play and her witchcraft. But he, in turn, had found a source of sorcery and had eventually left her for dead, escaping back to his stronghold as Elric and the others arrived.

"We were prepared for nothing but death," said Princess Shanug'a, "until this moment. I wonder what has brought us together now? And *why* should it bring us together at this moment? Do you have a hint of that, Master Phatt? Are we all moved by the hand of some manipulative Destiny?"

"It can only be the Balance," said Fallogard Phatt with nodding certainty.

But Elric said nothing. He knew that Stormbringer did not serve the Balance, and, were it not for the runesword, he would not now be here—ready to help the sisters. But did the sword know what they required of it?

Then, suddenly, Elric was struck by a terrifying thought. What if he had already served the sword's purpose so that Stormbringer no longer had use of the symbiosis on which the albino had come to rely? While this notion filled him with panic, he also loathed himself for his dependency upon the blade. He unhooked its scabbard from his belt and, volunteering what he had earlier refused Gaynor, offered it to the sisters.

"Here is the sword you sought, my kinswomen." He offered it without question, either in expression or gesture, without hesitation or any sign of

reluctance. Honour required nothing else.

Princess Tayaratuka stepped forward and, bowing, received the sword in both her little hands. Her muscles flexed with the blade's weight, but she did not flinch. She was considerably stronger than she appeared to be.

"We have our Rune," she said. "We have always had it. Since our people first came here and made this world their own. Even when the dragons left, we were not afraid, for we had our Rune. The Rune of Final Resort, it was called by some. But we had no sword. For the Rune of Final Resort must be spoken in conjunction with a ritual and a certain object. First it is required that the Black Sword be present: then he who wields the Sword must join us in the rune-calling. Then we must know the names of certain entities which must be summoned. All these things must come together at the same time. This is the pattern we must make, to mirror that which already exists and so create a duality which, in turn, releases the raw life-force of the multiverse. And only then, if we are accurate in our delicate weaving, will we revive the allies we seek against Chaos—the power to drive Mashabak and Gaynor and all their minions from our realm! If we are successful in this, Prince Elric, we are prepared to offer you one of three reclaimed treasures …" She glanced towards the Rose, but Wheldrake was quoting excitedly—

"The first of these treasures of Radinglay,
Was a rosewood box with roses 'graved,
While the second was that maiden's dower,
A fresh-pick'd summer rose in flower.
The third of these treasures were briar rings three,
To make fast the Kind of the Cold Country."

"Exactly," said Princess Mishiguya with something of a lifted eyebrow, as if she had scarcely expected her tale to be the subject of a minstrel's repertoire.

"He has," said Charion Phatt by way of apology for her near-betrothed, "something of a memory for verse …"

"Especially," said Wheldrake, bridling at what he interpreted as snobbery, "my own! Disapprove, if you like. I'm adrift in my own rhymes and rhythms." And he mumbled another stanza or two to himself.

Princess Mishiguya was gracious. The Rose also came to the poet's defense. "Without Master Wheldrake's cadences and remembered names we should even now be separated," she said. "His talents have proved of subtle usefulness to us all."

"Should we succeed," said Elric, replying, "I would accept your promise of a gift. For, I must admit, my own fate is somewhat bound up with one of those Objects of Power you have carried so long …"

"Not knowing which of the three you would accept. We did not even know you to be our kin—though it should have occurred to us. Sadly, of course, we no longer have those borrowed gifts in our possession …"

"The gifts are not redeemed!" said the Rose in sudden agitation. "We

hid them from Gaynor …"

"You were able to protect us," said Princess Tayaratuka, "but not your treasures. Gaynor raped them from their hiding place before he fled back to *The Ship That Was*. Those Objects of Power, lady, are already in the hands of Chaos. I thought you understood that."

The Rose sat slowly down upon a bench. Something like a groan escaped her. She waved them on. "Which makes your ritual all the more important to us …"

And Elric, following behind the women as they bore his sword into the depths of the palace where the ritual must take place, knew that both his own and his father's soul must now be truly doomed.

CHAPTER THREE

Rituals of Blood; Rituals of Iron. Three Sisters of the Sword. Six Swords Against Chaos.

Through cloisters of pink-and-red mosaic, down avenues of flowering bushes lit by glowing, refracted sunshine from hidden skylights, past galleries of paintings and sculpture, the four moved steadily. "This has a hint of Melniboné and yet is not Melniboné," said Elric thoughtfully.

Princess Tayaratuka was almost offended. "There is nothing of your Melniboné here, I hope. We have no strain in us of that warlike line. We are of those Vadhagh who fled the Mabden when Chaos aided them …"

"We of Melniboné determined we should flee no more," said Elric quietly. He had no quarrel with his ancestors' determined learning of the arts of battle lest they be scattered again. It was what such easy logic led to that he feared.

"I intended no criticism," said the princess. "We prefer, if necessary, to wander, rather than imitate the ways of those who would destroy us …"

"But now," said Princess Shanug'a, "we must do battle with Chaos, to defend what is ours."

"I did not say that we would not fight," her sister said firmly, "I said that we would not resort to the building of empires. These are two distinct things."

"I understand you, my lady," said the albino, "and I accept that difference. I have no liking for my people's penchant for empirebuilding."

"Well, my lord, there are many other ways to achieve security," said Princess Mishiguya a little mysteriously, even sharply, as they continued their way through the lovely apartments and galleries of this most civilized of settlements.

Princess Tayaratuka still carried the great sword, though with a certain effort. Even when Elric offered to take the weight for a while she refused, as if this were her duty.

Now a corridor widened into another triangular cloister which surrounded a cool rose garden open to the dark blue sky above. At the centre of the garden was a fountain. The base of the fountain was carved with all manner of odd and grotesque creatures, somewhat out of keeping with the general style, and the plinth rose up in a three-sided column to where it widened into a large bowl around which were carved the sinuous shapes of dragons and maidens engaged in some cryptic dance. Silvery water still sprayed from the fountain and Elric felt that it was a kind of blasphemy to bring the Black Sword to a place of such peace.

"This is the Garden of the Rune," said the Princess Mishiguya. "It lies at the very centre of our realm, our land; at the centre of this palace. This was the first garden built by the Vadhagh when they came here." She took a deep

breath of the ancient rosy scent. She held it as if it might be her last.

Princess Tayaratuka set the scabbarded runesword upon a bench and went to put her hands in the cool water, pouring it over her head almost as if she sought a blessing. Princess Shanug'a walked to the far end of the first of the three galleries and returned almost immediately bearing a cylinder of pale gold set with rubies which she handed now to Princess Mishiguya who drew from the cylinder another tube, of finely carved ivory bound with gold, and this tube she handed to Princess Tayaratuka who, in turn, drew from that a rod of engraved grey stone whose dark blue runes twisted and writhed as if alive and were like those same runes Stormbringer bore. Elric had seen such things on only one other object, the sword Mournblade, which his cousin had sought to bear against him, the sister sword to Stormbringer. Dimly, he recalled other tales of runic objects, but he had studied little in such areas. Did they have qualities in common?

Princess Tayaratuka was holding up the stone cylinder now, wondering at the shifting runes as if she had never seen them alive before, and her lips moved as she read them, forming words she had been taught in a time before she had learned to read any ordinary alphabet. This was her inheritance, this Rune of Power …

"Only three virgins born of the same mother and the same father at the same time may know the Ritual of the Rune," said Shanug'a in a whisper. "But the Rune cannot be completed until we have seen the Black Sword's runes and read those aloud in the Garden of the Rune. All these things must happen at once. Then, if we have spoken the Rune correctly, and if the magic has not faded in the centuries since it was distilled then perhaps we shall regain those things with which our ancestors brought us to this realm."

Princess Mishiguya went to the bench where the hellsword rested, almost passively, and she picked it up and took it to the fountain where her sister, Shanug'a, waited, the water flowing over her and seeming to merge with the silken gown she wore, and Shanug'a took the sword's grip in both her little hands and pulled deliberately so that bit by bit the blade emerged from the scabbard, the angry scarlet runes glowing already along the black metal, and a song escaped the sword that was unlike anything Elric had heard before. In all other hands, even perhaps Gaynor's, the unscabbarded hellsword would have resisted, turned upon the one who sought to hold it and almost certainly killed them. Important sorcery was needed to hold the Black Sword even for a short while. Yet now it sang a song so strange and so sweet, high and unhappy, full of longing and unfulfilled hungers, that Elric was momentarily terrified. He had never suspected such qualities in the sword.

Even as Stormbringer continued its strange, unlikely song, Princess Shanug'a raised it high in the air and brought the tip down into the centre of the oddly carved bowl so that suddenly the fountain ceased to gush and at once there was a silence in the rose garden.

A stillness came to the sky above, as if the dark-blue light froze; a

stillness in the garden, as if every flower and bud waited; a stillness in that triangular cloister, as if the very stones held themselves in readiness for some momentous event.

Even the three sisters seemed frozen in the attitudes of their ritual.

Awed by the scene, Elric felt he intruded and it occurred to him to withdraw, as if he were not required here, but Princess Tayaratuka was turning to him, smiling—offering him the runestone as it writhed and glowed in her palm.

"It is for you to read," she said. "Only you, of all the creatures in the multiverse, have this power. That is why we sought you so eagerly. You must read our Rune—as we read the Black Sword's. Thus shall we begin the weaving of this powerful magic. This is what we have been trained to do, almost since birth. You must believe us and trust us, Prince Elric."

"I have sworn the blood-bond," said Elric simply. He would do whatever they required of him, even if it meant his death, the enslavement of his immortal soul, the prospect of a hellish eternity. He would trust them without question.

The monstrous battle-blade stood upright in the bowl, the song still escaping it, the runes still flickering up and down its radiant black metal. It was almost as if it were about to speak, to transform itself into another shape, possibly its true shape. And Elric felt a chill in his soul and it seemed for a second that he looked into his future, to some predetermined doom for which this was a kind of rehearsal. Then he disciplined his mind and contemplated the task at hand.

One sister now stood on each side of the column, looking up at the sword. Their voices began to chant in unison, until it was no longer possible to distinguish their cadences from the sword's …

… Then Elric found that he was lifting up the runestone in his two hands stretched before him and his lips began to form wordless, beautiful sounds …

They had sought him for his sword; but they had sought him also for this unique gift. Only Elric of Melniboné, of all living mortals, had the power and the skills to read such potent symbols, to voice them as they must be voiced, matching each part of a note to each nuance of the rune. This rune, the sisters knew by heart, but the rune that blazed upon the Black Sword they themselves had to read. Thus they combined all their resources, all their talents, into the reading of a double rune, the mightiest of all Runes of Power.

The runesong rose in volume and became increasingly complicated—

—for now the four adepts were rune-weaving—folding their spells in and out of time, moving their voices beyond the audible range, making the air crease and shiver into thousands of strands which they wove and threaded—

—weaving the runes into a thing of impossible strength, making the very atmosphere bubble and dance, while all around now the shrubs and flowers swayed, as if adding their own rhythms and cadences to the runesong.

Everything was alive with a thousand different qualities, blending and separating, changing and transforming. Colours ran through the air like rivers. Eruptions of nameless forces came and went around them, while the bowl and the sword and the runestone seemed to become the only constancies in that double triangle.

Elric now understood how this was a place of enormously concentrated psychic energy. From this source, he guessed, they had drawn the power with which they had so far resisted Chaos—enough at least to protect a few settlements like these. But with the power of the Black Sword combined, the Garden of the Rune was becoming something infinitely mightier than anything it could have become on its own.

… to shatter the Sword of Alchemy and make the One power Three …

Elric realized he was hearing a story woven in amongst the runes, almost an incidental to the ritual they performed. It was a story of how these people were led by a dragon through the dimensions—a dragon which had dwelled once within a sword. Such legends were common to his folk and doubtless referred to some long-forgotten part of their wandering history. At last they had come to this land, which was uninhabited by human folk. So

they made it their own, building to follow the existing contours of the earth, its forests and rivers. But first they had built the Garden of the Rune. For through their considerable sorcery they had changed and hidden the power which, they believed, was the result of their salvation and any future salvation for their descendants.

The runesong went on. The story continued. Into the fountain were built what the song called 'the tools of last resort'. The princesses' ancestors passed the runestone down from mother to daughter since they believed no man capable of carrying the secret.

Only against Chaos could these tools of last resort be used, and only then when all else had failed them. They could only be used in combination with another great Object of Power. The borrowed Objects of Power which the sisters had held, and with which they had intended to bargain for Elric's help, ignorant of how close a kinsman he was, were not strong enough for the work.

Gaynor had stolen those Objects, knowing that Chaos feared them and desired them. One such Object had already been stolen from the Rose and returned to her possession by a surprising and circuitous means. The others she had guarded better. But none had been powerful enough to use in the Ritual of the Garden.

Yet while the three sisters sought Elric and the Black Sword, others, like Elric, had sought what the sisters carried. Now the circle was completed. Now every proper element in the psychic model was in place, giving the four of them the astral means to range free, to let their minds and souls roam beyond the dimensions, beyond the Spheres, even beyond the multiverse; to re-enter it with a fresh knowledge, a deeper understanding of that complex geometry whose secrets were the basis for all sorcery; whose forms were the basis for all poetry and all song; whose language was the basis of all thought and whose shapes were the basis for all aesthetics, for all beauty; all ugliness … Into this the four plunged, weaving with their runesongs fresh and original psychic patterns which had the effect of healing wounds and ruptures in the walls of time and space, while at the same time creating an enormous force with which to reanimate three other ancient Objects of Power.

More urgent and more complex were the runes now as they sang with their bodies and swam with their minds through near-infinities of screaming rainbows; sailing through their own bodies and out again into worlds and worlds of desolation, millennia of unchecked joy and a hint of that seductive ordinariness where so much of the human heart must always lie but which it so rarely celebrates …

So those old unhuman folk wove their spell, making manifest the promise of the runes, controlling the potency of un-moral magic which knew no loyalty save to itself.

The spell grew upon its own volition now, as it was meant to do, twisting and curling and creeping like the supple boughs of the yew-hedge

which clung together to create so much modest strength, and then they began to fashion what they had woven, forming it and re-forming it over and over again between them, twisting it and turning it, throwing it one to the other, touching it and tasting it and sniffing it and stroking it, until the force they now balanced between them, which hovered over the Black Sword itself, was of the perfect supernatural shape and almost ready for release …

Yet still the songs must be sung, to hold the force, to channel it; to bridle it and saddle it; to charge it with a moral will, to force it to make a *choice*—for this *stuff*, this prime matter, was constitutionally incapable of choice, of moral direction or persuasion. And so *must* be forced …

Forced by a concentration of psychic energy, of disciplined will and moral strength which resisted all attack upon it, either from without or within, and which refused to be deflected from its purpose by an argument, example or threat …

Forced by four creatures so similar that they were almost one flesh and, at this moment, essentially one mind …

Forced downwards through the Black Sword which was not itself the receptacle of that power but merely the final and much-needed conductor …

Forced through the living stone, into the slab of rock from which the bowl, column and plinth had been carved, thousands of years before …

To transform it—to alter it entirely from any kind of material remotely akin to stone—a living form of energy so immense it was impossible, even for the adepts themselves, to imagine the fullness of its power, or how such power could possibly be contained.

Now this energy, coruscating, swirling, dancing, celebrating its own incredible being, joined in the song of the sisters, the albino and the runesword, until they formed a choir which could be heard throughout the multiverse, in every Sphere, upon every part of every planet; echoing forever throughout the multitude of planes and dimensions of the quasi-infinite. To be heard always, now, somewhere, while the multiverse existed. It was a song of promise, of responsibility and of celebration. A promise of harmony; the triumph of love; a celebration of the multiverse in balance. It was through an exquisite metaphysical harmony that they controlled this force and made it obey them, releasing it once more …

… Releasing it into three great Objects of Power which, as the fountain faded away, were revealed, grouped around the Black Sword standing in the centre of the small pool …

… Three swords, the weight and length of Stormbringer, but otherwise very different in appearance:

The first sword was made of ivory, with an ivory blade that looked oddly sharp and an ivory hilt and an ivory grip, bound about with bands of gold which seemed to have grown into the ivory.

The second sword was made of gold, yet was as sharp as its companion, and it was bound with ebony.

The third sword was of blue-grey granite furnished in silver.

These were the swords the Rune had hidden so well and which were now infused with a power to match that of Stormbringer itself …

Princess Tayaratuka, all in flowing gold, reached a golden hand towards the golden sword and took it to her breast with a deep sigh …

Her sister Mishiguya, in grey-blue silks, stretched out her own hand to the granite sword, seized it and gasped, grinning with the ecstasy and triumph of their success …

… and Princess Shanug'a, very grave in white robes, took down the ivory sword and kissed it. "Now," she said, turning to the others, "we are ready to do battle with a Lord of Chaos."

Elric, still weak from the rune-weaving, staggered to take hold of his own sword. Out of some sense of respect, or some unremembered ritual, he replaced it with the runestone, from which he had read the beginning of that great Casting …

Elric, my son—hast thou my soulbox? Did the sisters give it thee?

His father's voice. Some intimation of what he would know for always should he fail. And it seemed that he had certainly failed …

Elric, the time is almost here. My sorcery cannot hold me much longer … I must come to thee, my son … I must come to the one I hate most in the entire multiverse … To live with him for ever …

"I have not found your soulbox, Father," he murmured and then looked up to see the sisters watching him curiously when, all of a sudden, into the cloister came a breathless Koropith Phatt.

"Oh, thank heaven! I thought you all destroyed! There was a—a kind of storm. But you are here! They did not attack from within as we had feared."

"Gaynor?" said Elric, rescabbarding the oddly quiescent runeblade. "Has he returned?"

"Not Gaynor—at least, I think not—but a Chaos army—coming against us. Oh, prince, dear princesses, we are upon the point of our extinguishment!"

Which had them running as fast as they could go in the wake of the youth as he took them up to join the others in a room formed from a ledge of rock and disguised by foliage; this formed a natural balcony from which they could look out over the surrounding countryside and see the crystalline trees shattering and smashing as a great river of armoured semi-humanity pressed towards their retreat.

An army of bestial men and manlike beasts, some with natural carapaces, like gigantic beetles, all armed with pikes and morningstars and maces and broadswords and meat-cleavers of every description, some riding one upon the other, some dragging snoring companions, some in mysterious congress, some pausing to throw dice or settle a quarrel before being beaten back into line by their officers, whose helms sported the yellow blazon of

eight-arrowed Chaos.

Snorting and wheezing, whiffling and sneezing; grunting and squealing and yelping; bellowing like bulls in a slaughterhouse, the Chaos army advanced: a single appetite.

The Rose turned frightened eyes to greet her friends. "There is nothing we have can withstand that army," she said. "It is retreat again, then …?"

"No," said Princess Tayaratuka. "This time we do not need to retreat." She was leaning on a sword almost as tall as herself but which she carried with considerable panache, as if she and the blade had always been one.

Her sisters, too, bore their swords as casually, and with fresh confidence.

"These swords are powerful enough to challenge Chaos?" Wheldrake was the first to voice the question. "Good heavens, your majesties! See how the old rhyme does poor justice to the true value of the epic! It is what I always tell them when they accuse me of being over-imaginative! I cannot *begin* to describe what is really out there! What I *actually* see!" He virtually crowed with excitement. "What, indeed, the world around them is *really* like! Are we to do battle with Chaos at last?"

"You must stay here with Mother Phatt," said Charion. "It is your duty, my dear."

"You must stay, too, dear child!" cried Fallogard Phatt in great dismay. "You are not a warrior! You are a clairvoyant!"

"I am both now, Uncle," she said firmly. "I have no special blade to aid me, but I have my special wit, which gives me considerable advantage of most opponents. I learned much, Uncle, in the service of Gaynor the Damned! Let me go with you, ladies, I beg."

"Aye," said Princess Mishiguya, "you are well-fitted to battle Chaos. You may go with us."

"And I would go with you, also," said the Rose. "My magic is exhausted, but I have fought Chaos many times and survived, as you know. Let me bear my Swift Thorn and my Little Thorn into battle beside you. For if we are to die at this time, I would rather die fulfilling my vocation."

"Then so be it," said Princess Shanug'a and looked enquiringly towards her kinsman. "Five swords against Chaos—or six?"

Elric was still staring at that horrific army which looked as if everything obscene and evil and brutish and greedy in the human race had been given features. He turned back with a shrug. "Six, of course. But they will require our every resource to defeat them. I suspect that we do not see all that Chaos sends against us. Yet I, too, have not made use of everything …"

He raised his gauntleted hand to his lips, brooding on a matter which had just entered his mind.

Then he said: "The others must stay here, to make their escape if need be. I charge you, Master Wheldrake, with the well-being of Mother Phatt and Koropith Phatt, as well as Fallogard …"

"Really, sir. I am capable …" said that untidy idealist.

"I have every respect for your capabilities, sir," said Elric, "but you are not experienced in these matters. You must be ready to flee, since you have no means of defending yourself or your people. Your psychic gifts might help you find a means of escape before Chaos discovers you. Believe me, Master Phatt, if it seems we are about to be defeated you must flee this realm! Use whatever powers you still possess to find a means of escape—and take the others with you."

"I will not leave while Charion is here," said Wheldrake firmly.

"You must, for everyone's sake," Charion said. "Uncle Fallogard will have need of you."

But it was fairly clear from Wheldrake's manner that he had made up his own mind on the matter.

"The horses are ready for us in the stables below," said Princess Tayaratuka. "Six horses of copper and silver, as the weaving demands."

Wheldrake watched his friends leave. Something he disliked in himself was grateful that he did not have to go with them and face such disgusting foes; something else yearned to go with them, yearned to be part of their epic fight, rather than its mere recorder …

A little later, as he leaned upon the balcony and watched the slow, sickening advance of that evil, brutified pack, crushing all it encountered and taking only absent-minded pleasure in the destruction it caused, the poet saw six figures leave the shadows of the cliff and ride on chestnut, silver-maned horses without hesitating into the clashing crystals of the forest. Elric, the three sisters, Charion Phatt and the Rose—side by side they cantered—straight-backed in their saddles—to do battle with that manifestation of perverse evil and greedy cruelty—to fight for their very future: for their history; for the merest memory of their ever having existed somewhere in the vast multiverse …

At this sight, Wheldrake laid down his expectant pen and, instead of concocting some glorious Romance from the action of those six brave riders, he offered up an impassioned prayer in respect of the lives and the souls of his cherished friends.

Pride in his companions, together with his fears for their well-being, had struck the little man speechless.

Now he watched as the Rose broke away from her fellows and rode a little way ahead until she was only a few yards from the first swaying howdahs of the massive war-beasts, part-mammal, part-reptile, which Chaos habitually used in its attacks. Already the stupid heads, lips and nostrils glistening with ichor which hung like dirty ropes from their orifices and left a trail of slime for the others to follow, were turning to sniff some alien scent, some body not yet touched and warped by the limitless, cruel and casual creativity of Chaos.

Then, from the leading howdah, all hung with human skins and other

savageries, poked out a head to peer down at the Rose as she advanced upon the throng.

The helmet was immediately recognized by Wheldrake.

It belonged to Gaynor, ex-Prince of the Universal.

The death-seeker had come personally to savour the final agonies of these most irritating of his enemies.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Fight in the Crystalline Wood: Chaos Regenerated. The Tangled Woman. To The Ship That Was.

"Prince Gaynor," said the Rose, "you and your warriors have invaded this land." She spoke with angry formality. "And we now order you to leave. We are here to banish Chaos from this realm."

Gaynor said coolly: "Sweet Rose, you have been driven mad by your knowledge of our power. You should not resist us further, lady. We ourselves are here to establish Gaynor's rule once and for all upon your realm. We offer you the mercy of immediate death."

"That mercy is a lie!" said Charion Phatt from where she sat on her silver-maned horse beside the others. "All that you say is a lie. And what is not a lie is mere vainglory!"

Gaynor's mysterious helm turned slowly to regard the young woman and a deep, assured chuckle escaped the Prince of the Damned. "You have a naïve courage, child, but it is by no means sufficient to offer resistance to the power Chaos commands. Which *I* command."

There was a fresh note in Gaynor's voice, a new kind of confidence, and Elric wondered, with some unease, how the Prince of the Damned had come by it. Gaynor seemed to believe his position was, if anything, stronger. Did more Chaos Lords group behind him? Was this to be the beginning of the great battle between Law and Chaos which so many oracles had predicted in recent centuries?

As he watched the Rose raise herself in her saddle and draw her sword Swift Thorn, Elric marveled at the woman's self-control; for she faced the creature that had betrayed her and caused the agonized deaths of all her people. She faced him and did not reveal in any way her contempt and hatred of him. Yet twice he had bested her in a struggle without beating her and this he must know. Perhaps that was the reason for his new-found braggadocio? Perhaps he sought to deceive them into believing he had more power than was apparent?

Now the Rose was riding back to rejoin her friends crying: "Know this, Gaynor the Damned, whatever is the worst thing you fear, *that* shall be your fate after this day! This I promise you!"

Gaynor's answering laughter had little humour, merely threat. "There is no punishment I fear, madam. Do you not know that yet? Since I am not permitted the luxury of death, then I shall find it for myself—and make millions seek it with me! Each death I cause, lady, consoles me for an instant. You die in my place. All of you shall die in my place. For me." His tone became a lover's and his words caressed her retreating back like the foul coaxing hand of Vice personified. "For *me*, lady."

When she took her place again with the others, the Rose looked

steadily into Gaynor's helm, which squirmed with the flames and smoke of his own myriad torments, and she said: "None of us shall die, Prince Gaynor. Least of all, on your behalf!"

"My surrogates!" called Gaynor, laughing again. "My sacrifices! Go to find death! Go! You do not realize I am your benefactor!"

But already the six of them, Elric and the Rose slightly ahead of their companions, were cantering through the shimmering, jangling forest, their swords drawn, their chestnut, silver-maned horses, bred in a distant age only for war and brought here by the sisters from some more barbaric realm, lifting their hoofs in sprightly anticipation of battle, their heavy harness clattering in unison with the broken branches of the crystal trees, their great heads nodding in impatience, their nostrils flaring as they anticipated the stink of blood, snorting and gnashing their teeth, rolling their eyes and glorying in the anticipation of the coming fight, for this was what they had been bred to do; becoming only fully alive when in the thick of violent destruction.

Elric, glad to feel such a fine war-stallion under him, understood how these horses looked forward to the ecstatic oblivion of battle. He, too, knew that singular joy, when every sense was alert and at its sharpest, when life never seemed sweeter or death more fearsome—and yet he knew what a false lure it was to lose himself in such mindless struggle. He wondered, not for the first time, if he was fated always to seek such struggles out, as if he, like the horses, had been bred for one special task? Hating it, he swiftly gave himself up to the thrilling delight of his battle-lust, and soon, as the first of Chaos's creatures came against him, he knew nothing but that lust …

Wheldrake, watching from the bower far above, saw the six riders converge upon the forces of Chaos and it seemed that they must be immediately swallowed. The very size of the Chaos beasts, the weight and grotesque power of the Chaos army, was more than enough, surely, to crush

them in an instant?

Now a great shaft of scintillating light illuminated the riders as they merged with the colossal war-beasts who rumbled relentlessly on through the coruscating forest. Wheldrake saw six points flickering in that generality of lumbering limbs and widening jaws—one was a dark radiance he recognized as Stormbringer's—two were of ordinary, metallic glint—one more was a creamy white light, another the grey hard gleam of granite, and the last was the warm glow of ancient gold. Half-blinded by the crystal's shattered brightness, Wheldrake lost sight of the swords again and, when he could see clearly once more, he was astonished!

Four half-reptilian monsters lay in agony upon the radiant crystals, their howdahs crushed as they rolled and bellowed.

Wheldrake saw Gaynor's agitated figure, all angry, living metal, running back into the heart of his army, seeking a fresh mount. There was a sword in his gauntleted fist now—a sword that forked black and yellow—a sword whose blade seemed to twist in and out of the dimensions even as the Damned One wielded it …

And Wheldrake guessed that the three sisters were not the only adepts who had sung a great rune or cast some other potent spell, for the sword in Gaynor's hand was unlike any he had borne before.

Yet elsewhere, still, the Chaos creatures fell before a kind of thin ribbon of glittering light which carved into their ranks as surely as a scythe through wheat …

Hand raised against his eyes to see through the blinding crystalline multicoloured rays that mirrored in some terrible way the beauty of the multiverse, Elric swung his great black blade this way and that, feeling only the faintest of resistance as, with thirsty ease, Stormbringer feasted upon the lives and souls of the warped half-beasts who had once been men and women before they pledged their miserable lives to Chaos …

There was no satisfaction at this killing, even though there was joy in the act of battle. Each fighter at Elric's side knew that, but for chance and a certain firmness of purpose, they, too, might be part of this army of damned souls … for Chaos was not the master most readily chosen by the majority of mortals …

Yet kill them they must—or be killed. Or see whole realms perish as Chaos gathered momentum, drawing upon the power of the conquered worlds to accomplish further conquests …

With the grace of dancers, with the precision of surgeons, with the sorrowing eyes of unwilling slaughterers, the three sisters joined in battle with those who had already destroyed most of their kinfolk.

Charion Phatt, dismounted from a horse she found too unresponsive, darted here and there with her sword, cutting swiftly at a Chaos creature's vitals and slipping in to cut again, using her psychic gifts to anticipate attack from any quarter and never being present when the attack came. Like the

sisters', her movements were efficient and she took no pleasure in the destruction …

… Only the Rose shared some of Elric's joy, for she, like him, had been trained to battle—even if her enemies were somewhat different—and Swift Thorn struck with expert skill at exposed organs and vulnerable places on the malformed half-men, using subtlety and speed as her chief defense—guiding her chestnut-and-silver warhorse into the densest parts of the Chaos pack's ranks and slicing so accurately at a chosen target that she brought one monster tumbling down upon another, a churning of heavy paws and legs which killed more of their own kind even as they, themselves, perished.

The wild exultant battle-song of his ancestors came to Elric's lips as he followed the Rose into the heart of the enemy and the sword fed him the energy it did not take itself until his eyes glowed almost as hotly as Gaynor's, so that it seemed he, too, was filled to bursting with the fires of hell …

Now Wheldrake began to gasp as he saw that the six thin needles of radiance still flickered amongst all that slaughter—and already more than half the apparently invincible Chaos army was destroyed, a mass of torn and crushed flesh, of grotesque limbs and even more grotesque heads lifted in the final torments of unholy death.

… while clambering through this carnage, pushing aside imploring claws and pleading faces, plunging his steel heels into screaming mouths or agonized eyes, using for leverage any limb or organ or foothold in bone or flesh he could find, his flaring Chaos-blazoned armour all spotted with the blood and offal of his ruined army, came Gaynor the Damned, the black-and-yellow sword forking and fluttering in his hand like some living flag, and now there were names on his lips—names which became curses—names which became the synonyms for everything he hated, feared and most longingly desired …

… but this was a hatred expressed through random, disruptive violence and destruction; a fear which found its swiftest form in raging aggression; a desire so intense and so eternally frustrated that this had become the thing in himself Gaynor hated worst of all and hated in every creature he encountered …

… and it was upon Elric of Melniboné, who might have been his alter ego, some cosmic opposite, who had chosen the hardest of roads to follow rather than the easiest, that Gaynor the Damned concentrated the greatest volume of his enraged hatred. For Elric might yet become what Gaynor the Damned had been and which he could never be again …

… so thoroughly saturated with the air of Chaos was Gaynor that at this moment he was little more than a half-beast himself. He growled and he shrieked as he crawled over the corpses of his slain warriors, he made hideous, wordless noises, he slobbered as if he already tasted Elric's deficient blood …

"*Elric! Elric of Melniboné! Now I shall send thee to do eternal service*

with thy banished master! Elric! Arioch awaits thee. I offer up to him in friendly reconciliation the soul of his recalcitrant servitor …"

But Elric did not hear his enemy. His own ears were full of ancient battle-songs, his concentration was upon his immediate opponents as, one by one, he cut them down and took their souls for himself.

These souls he did not dedicate to Arioch, for Arioch had proved himself too fickle a patron and, as was clear, had no power in this realm. Whatever was left of Esbern Snare had carried Arioch back through the dimensions to his own domain, where he must recoup his strength and make fresh plots in his eternal rivalry with his fellow lords.

Elsewhere Charion Phatt and the Rose continued their delicate butchery, while Stormbringer's sister swords rose and fell and made their own sweet, eerie music, as subtle and as dangerous as the three sisters who wielded them. Elric had never known such mortal peers. The knowledge that they were nearby filled him with a kind of pride and made his battle-joy the greater as he continued his sorcerous slaughter while, dimly now, through all that din of outraged militancy, he thought he heard his own name being called.

Two Chaos warriors, with spiked armour half-hiding skin like barnacles, struck at him together but were too slow for Elric and his hellblade —their heads flew like buckets at a sideshow and one spiked an eye in a second pair who came against him, confusing them both so that they slew each other, but meanwhile Elric galloped beside a wading half-reptile as it clambered over the ruined flesh towards the Rose and with two quick strokes had severed secret tendons and brought the Chaos beast crashing upon the bodies of its fallen fellows, roaring out its impotent anger, its stupefied astonishment at this discovery of its own mortality …

Yet more insistent now was that faint, familiar sound …

"*Elric! Elric! Chaos awaits thee, Elric!*" A high, keening sound; a vengeful wind.

"*Elric! Soon we shall see an end to all thine optimism!*"

Up a mound of Chaos carrion rode Elric on his war-trained steed, to take stock of their battle …

Wheldrake on his balcony saw Elric's horse climb that rise in the carpet of the conquered, saw the Black Sword raised in the albino's black-gauntleted right hand, saw the left hand lifted against the blazoning rays which still sprang from every direction, wherever the crystal trees were broken. That dazzling intermixture of colour and light gave still more distance to the scene and Wheldrake, seeing what Elric did not yet see, offered up another prayer …

… Gaynor, carving his way through a pile of already rotting corpses, his armour now almost wholly encrusted with the remains of his warriors, plunged forward, still snarling Elric's name, still obsessed with nothing but vengeance …

"*Elric!*"

A thin sound, like the warning cry of a faraway bird, and Elric recognized the voice as Charion Phatt's.

"*Elric! He is close to you. I can sense him. He has more power than we suspected. You must destroy him somehow … Or he will destroy us all!*"

"ELRIC!" This last a great grunt of satisfaction as, through the piled corpses, Gaynor broke at last, to stand with his horrid eyes trained upon the face of his greatest enemy, the black-and-yellow sword, the ragged sword, flickering in his hand like lava fresh from some volcanic maw. "I did not think I would have need of this new power of mine, as yet. But here you are. And here am I!"

With that Gaynor lunged at Elric and the albino brought up Stormbringer easily to block him. At which Gaynor, surprisingly, laughed and lingered in the attitude of his failed stroke until, suddenly, the albino realized what was happening and tried to pull back, dragging Stormbringer free of the leechblade now seeking to suck all life from it. Elric had heard of blades which fed, in some strange manner, on the energies of such as Stormbringer—a parasite on whatever occult force emanated from the alien iron out of which these swords were forged.

"You resort to some ungentlemanly sorcery, it seems, Prince Gaynor." Elric knew that much of the power still remained in his blade, but could not risk further leeching of that energy.

"Honour has no place in my catalogue of useful qualities!" Gaynor spoke almost lightly, feinting with the black-and-yellow leechblade. "But if it did, I would say, Prince Elric, that you lack courage to face a foe, man to man—each with a singular sword to aid his work. Are we not fairly matched, Prince of Ruins?"

"Well enough, well enough, I suppose, sir," said Elric, hoping that the sisters would understand the urgency of their joint predicament. And, expertly, he made his horse sidestep another almost playful feint.

"You fear me, Elric, eh? You fear death, do you?"

"Not death," said Elric. "Not that ordinary death which is a transition …"

"What of that death which is sudden and everlasting oblivion?"

"I do not fear it," said the albino. "Though I do not desire it, either."

"As you know I desire it!"

"Aye, Prince Gaynor. But you are not permitted to possess it. You never shall suffer such easy release."

"Maybe." Gaynor the Damned became almost secretive at this and he turned to look over his shoulder to chuckle as he saw Princess Tayaratuka riding back towards them while her sisters and the other two women continued their fierce advance. "Are there, I wonder, any constants at all in the multiverse? Is the Balance no more than a pleasant invention with which mortals reassure themselves that there is some kind of order? What evidence do we observe of this?"

"We can *create* the evidence," said Elric quietly. "It is within our power to do that. To create order, justice, harmony …"

"You moralize too much, my lord. It is the sign of a morbid mind, sir. An over-burdened conscience, perhaps."

"I will not be condescended to by such as yourself, Gaynor." Elric let his body appear to relax, his expression become casual. "A conscience is not always a burden."

"O, murderer of kin and betrothed! What else but loathing can ye feel for your deficient character?" Gaynor feinted with words even as he feinted with the leechsword, and both were designed to deprive the albino of his faith in his own skills, his will to survive.

"I have killed more villains than I have killed innocents," said Elric firmly, though it was clear Gaynor knew how to strike at the very vitals of his being. "And I regret only that I cannot have the pleasure of slaying thee, failed Servant of the Balance."

"Make no mistake, my lord, it would be a pleasure for us both," said Gaynor—and now he lunged—now Elric must block the blow. And again the energy from the sword was drained in a great gobbling up of cosmic force, and the black-and-yellow leechsword began to pulse with dirty light.

Elric, unprepared for the power of Gaynor's sword, fell backwards and almost lost his seat, the runesword hanging uselessly from its wrist-thong. The albino, slumping forward in his saddle, gasping for air, saw all they had lately won about to be taken back in moments … He croaked for Princess Tayaratuka, riding close now, to flee—to avoid the leechsword at any cost, for now it was twice as powerful as it had been …

But the princess could not hear him. Even now, with a grace that made her seem almost weightless, she was bearing down upon Gaynor the Damned, the golden sword whistling and ululating in her right hand, her black hair whipped behind her, her violet eyes alight with the prospect of Gaynor's doom …

… and again Gaynor blocked her blow. Again he laughed. And again, in astonishment, Princess Tayaratuka felt the energy draining from herself and her blade …

… then, almost casually, Gaynor had knocked her from her saddle with the butt of his sword, leaving her to lie helplessly amongst the mangled flesh and bone of the field, and on her horse was riding to where the others fought, still oblivious of the danger he brought …

Princess Tayaratuka lifted her eyes to Elric's as the albino strove to drag himself upright. "Elric, have you no other sorcery to help us?"

Elric racked his brains, considering all the grimoires and charts and words he had memorized as a child, and could put himself in tune with no psychic power at all …

"Elric," came Tayaratuka's hoarse whisper, "see—Gaynor has downed Shanug'a—the horse races with her, beyond control … and now Mishiguya is

fallen from her horse … Elric, we are lost! We are lost in spite of all our sorceries!"

And Elric began dimly to recollect an old alliance his folk had had with some near-supernatural creatures who had helped them in the early days of the founding of Melniboné, but he could remember only a name …

"*Tangled Woman,*" he murmured, his lips dry and cracking. It was as if his whole body were drained of substance and that any movement would snap it in a dozen places. "The Rose will know …"

"Come," said Tayaratuka, getting to her feet and grabbing hold of his horse's bridle, "we must tell them …"

But Elric had nothing to tell; merely the memory of a memory, of an old tryst with some natural spirit which owed no loyalty to Law or Chaos; of a nagging hint of a spell—some chant he had been taught as a boy, as an exercise in summoning …

The Tangled Woman.

He could not remember who she was.

Gaynor was disappeared again, into his own ranks, seeking out Charion Phatt and the Rose, for now he was armed with a sword four times more powerful than those which had come against him and he wished to test the blade on ordinary, mortal flesh …

Wheldrake, still watching, still praying, saw everything from his balcony. He saw Princess Tayaratuka sheath her golden sword and lead Elric's horse to where her sisters stood, also in attitudes of exhaustion. Their horses had bolted in Gaynor's wake.

Yet still Gaynor had not found the Rose, and Charion Phatt evaded him as easily as an urchin in a market, returning to the others and speaking with some heat to the prone albino …

… When, round a pile of corpses, rode the Rose, dismounting in a single movement as she saw the predicament of her friends …

Then she, too, kneeled beside the fallen albino and she took his hand …

"There is one spell," said Elric. "I am trying to recall it. There is, perhaps, a memory. Concerning you, Rose, or some folk of your own …"

"All my folk are dead, save me," said the Rose, her soft, pink skin flushed with the work of battle. "And it seems I, too, am to die."

"No!" Elric struggled to his feet. He held tight to his pommel while the horse shifted nervously, not knowing why it could not continue with its battle. "You must help me, lady. There is something about a woman, the Tangled Woman …"

The name was familiar to her.

"All I know is this," she said, and, with furrowed brow, she recalled some lines of verse …

"In the first creative weaving of a world,
In the time before the time of long ago,

When neither haughty Law nor fractured Chaos rules,
Lives a creature born of foliage and flesh,
Who seeks to weave her world a-fresh,
And weaves one fine, a woven womb,
A womb of bramble flowers strong,
In which to sing her briar-song,
And bear her thorny child, who grows
Into a perfect rose.

"They are Wheldrake's. From his youth, he says."

But then she saw that she had, in a way she might never understand, communicated something to the pale lord, for Elric's lips were moving and his eyes were raised to look into worlds the others could not see. Strange musical sounds came out of his lips, and even the three sisters could not understand what he said, for he spoke no earthly tongue. He spoke a tongue of the dark clay and the winding roots, of the old bramble-nests where the wild Vadhagh once, legend had it, played and spawned their strange offspring, part flesh, part leafy wood, a people of the forest and forgotten gardens, and, when he hesitated, it was the Rose who joined him in his song, in the language of a folk who were not her own, but whose ancestors had mingled with her own and whose blood flowed in her to this day.

They sang together, sending their song through all the dimensions of the multiverse, to where a dreaming creature stirred and lifted up arms made of a million woven brambles and turned faces which, too, were of knotted rosewood, in the direction of the song it had not heard for a hundred thousand years. And it was as if the song brought her to life, gave her some meaning at a moment when she had been about to die, so that, almost upon a whim, from something like curiosity, the Tangled Woman shifted her brambly body, arm by arm and leg by leg, then head by head, and, with a rustling movement which made all her foliage shudder, she formed herself into a shape very like a human shape, though somewhat larger.

And with that, she took a casual step through time and space which had not been in existence when she had first decided to sleep, and which she therefore ignored, and found herself standing in an ill-smelling morass of corrupt flesh and rotting bone which displeased her. But through all this she sensed another scent, something of herself in it, and she lowered her massive, woven head, a head of thick thorn branches whose eyes were not eyes at all, but flowers and leaves, and then she opened her briar lips and asked, in a voice so low it shook the ground, why her daughter had summoned her?

To which the Rose replied, in similar speech, while Elric sang his own tale to her, in a melody she found tolerable. It seemed that she concentrated her woven branches more thickly about her and looked with a certain sternness towards Gaynor and the remains of the Chaos army which had come full stop to stare at her before, at Gaynor's lifting of his black-and-yellow sword, a shard of raging energy, they began to race to the attack!

And the sisters clutched hands, linked with Charion and Elric and the

Rose, and they held tight for security and power, for they somehow informed the Tangled Woman in her primitive soul—they directed her as she bent and reached a many-branched hand towards Gaynor, who barely yanked his horse aside in time and rode beneath her, slashing at the wood which, because the energy which enlivened it was of a kind that no power could suck out nor any mortal weapon damage, was scarcely marked and, where it was marked, healed immediately.

With calm deliberation now, as if she performed some unwelcome household task, the Tangled Woman stretched her long fingers through the attacking ranks of Chaos, oblivious to their hacking swords and jabbing pikes, their bitings and their clawings, and wove her fingers thoroughly amongst them, twining and twisting and bending and entangling them until every Chaos warrior and every Chaos beast still living was embraced and fixed by her bramble fingers.

Only one figure escaped, riding like fury from the bloody crystals of that battlefield, slashing at the horse's rump with the satiated leechsword.

Tangled Woman reached thin tentacles out towards the disappearing Gaynor but had little strength left; just enough to flick, with a thin, green branch, the sword from his flailing hand and bear it triumphantly up, to fling it away, deep into the forest where a black pool began to spread, turning all the surrounding crystal to the consistency of coal.

Then the leechsword vanished and they heard Gaynor's furious yell as he forced the sweating stallion up out of the valley and rode, without looking back, down the other side, to vanish.

Tangled Woman had lost interest in Gaynor. Slowly she withdrew her brambly fingers from the field, from the bloody corpses her thorns had pierced, from the flesh from which life had been crushed, her victims knowing a cleaner death than any Elric offered.

But now Elric pulled himself into his saddle and, while the others refused to look, he went about the business of slaughtering the wounded, letting the sword feast and renew his energy. He was determined to find and punish Gaynor for the evil he had done. And as he passed among what remained of the living, their imploring wails were ignored. "I must steal from you what your master would have stolen from us," he explained. And that killing had neither honour nor satisfaction in it. He did only what was necessary.

When he returned to his companions the Tangled Woman had gone, taking whatever payment she required, and all that were left were the dead.

"The Chaos army is defeated," said Princess Shanug'a. "But Chaos still dwells within our realm. Gaynor still has power here. He will soon come against us again." She had recaptured her horse.

"We must not *let* him come again," said the Rose, cleaning Swift Thorn upon a scrap of satin surcoat. "We must drive him back to hell and ensure he never more threatens your realm!"

"It is true," said Elric, moody with his own unquiet thoughts, "we must track the beast back to its lair and it must be confined, even if we cannot kill it. Can you find the way, Charion Phatt?"

"I can find it," she said. She had several minor wounds, which the others had helped her dress, but there was a kind of breathless pleasure in the way she moved, as if she were still exulting in her unexpected salvation. "He has returned, without doubt, to *The Ship That Was.*"

"His stronghold …" murmured the Rose.

"Where," said Princess Mishiguya, settling herself in her saddle, "his power must be greatest."

"There is a power there, to be sure," agreed Charion, drawing her brows together—"a mightier power than any he commanded on this field. Yet I cannot completely understand why he did not use it against us here."

"Perhaps he awaits us," said Elric. "Perhaps he knows we will come …"

"We must go to reclaim the Rose's treasures," said Princess Tayaratuka. "We cannot allow Prince Gaynor to hold them."

"Indeed," agreed Elric with some feeling and a renewing sense of urgency. He had remembered that his father's soul remained in Gaynor's keeping and that very soon Arioch or some other Duke of Hell would try to claim it, whereupon it would flee to him and hide within his own being, forever united, father and son.

Elric drew off his black gauntlets and put his hands upon his horse's muscular flanks, but nothing would take away the chill that gripped his being. No ordinary warmth could comfort him.

"What of the others?" said Charion. "What of my uncle and my grandma, my cousin and my betrothed? I think they must be reassured."

They rode slowly back towards the cavern city, stabling their horses before beginning the long climb up the steps and walkways hidden within the walls, and when they finally reached the balcony where they had left the others, they found only Wheldrake.

He was distraught. His eyes were full of tears. He embraced Charion Phatt but his gesture was one of consolation rather than joy. "They have gone," he said. "They saw that you were losing the battle. Or thought they saw that. Fallogard had to consider his son and his mother. He did not want to leave, but I made him. He had the power to do it. He could have taken me, but there was no time and I would not go."

"Gone?" said Charion, holding him at arm's length now. "Gone, my love?"

"Mother Phatt opened what she called a 'tuck' and they crawled under it, to disappear—at the very moment when that vast thicket materialized. It was too late. They have escaped!"

"From what?" yelled Charion Phatt, enraged. "To what? Oh, must we begin this search all over again?"

"It seems so, my dear," said Wheldrake meekly, "if we are to have your uncle's blessing, as we had hoped."

"We must follow them," she said firmly.

"Not yet," said the Rose softly. "First we must ride to *The Ship That Was*. I have a small reckoning to extract from Gaynor the Damned—and from the company I suspect he keeps."

CHAPTER FIVE

Concerning the Capturing and the Auctioning of Certain Occult Artifacts: Reverses in the Higher Worlds; The Rose Exacts her Revenge; Resolving a Cosmic Compromise.

The little caravan came to a ragged halt as the cliffs were reached at last. Their remaining horses, sometimes carrying double, were almost completely exhausted. But they had found the Heavy Sea; dragging its dark and weighty waves upon the shore, then dragging them back again, all beneath a slow, morbid sky. They looked down now at the narrow entrance of a bay, where the sea seemed calmer. Its high, obsidian walls enclosed a beach of oddly coloured shingle, of bits of quartz and shards of limestone, of semi-precious stones and glaring flint.

Anchored in the bay was a ship which Elric recognized at once. Her sail was furled, but the great covered cage in the forecastle made her prow-heavy. Gaynor's ship and her crew had rejoined their master. On the far side of a spur of rock, which obscured their sight of the rest of the beach, there seemed to be activity—perhaps a figure or two—and now they must allow their horses to pick their way slowly down the narrow track from cliff to beach, threatening to slip on the shiny rock. Then at last the hoofs were grinding down upon the gleaming shingle, making a sound like ice being crushed, and the companions could see that the beach extended beyond the spur and that it was possible to ride along it.

Princess Tayaratuka rode a little ahead; then came her sisters (sharing a horse). Then came the Rose, followed by Elric and Charion Phatt, with Wheldrake's tiny hands about her waist. A strangely disparate party, but with many shared ambitions …

Then they had rounded the point and they looked upon *The Ship That Was*.

Before them stood one of the most grotesque settlements Elric had ever seen.

Once it had, indeed, been a ship. A ship whose score of decks rose higher and higher to form what had been a vast, floating ziggurat crewed by huge, unhuman creatures; a ship worthy of Chaos herself. Her lines had the appearance of something organic which had petrified suddenly after being tortured into unnatural forms. Here and there were suggestions of faces, limbs, torsos, of otherworldly beasts and birds, of gigantic fish and creatures which were combinations of all these things. And the ship seemed to Elric to be of a piece with the Heavy Sea which, like green quartz turned viscous and sluggish now, flung its spume upon that gloomy strand where men, women and children, in every variety of clothing, in rags and silks and shoes which rarely matched, in the filthy sables of some slaughtered king, in the jerkins and breeks of a nameless sailor, in the dresses and undergarments of the drowned,

in the hats and jewels and embroidery with which the dead had once celebrated their vanity, moved backwards and forwards amongst those dreadful breakers, amongst carrion and flotsam brought here on the morose tide, the detritus of centuries, to scuttle with any treasure they might discover back to the warren of the ship, which lay at a slight angle on the beach, its starboard buried, its port a-tilt, where perhaps a mast had halted its complete upending.

A dead husk, the ship was infested with its human inhabitants much as the body of some slain sea-giant might be infested with worms. They stained it with their very presence, dishonoured it by their squalor, as the bones of the fallen are stained and dishonoured by the droppings and the debris of the crows which feed upon their putrefying flesh. Within the ship was constant movement, an impression of one writhing mass of life without individual identity or concerns, without dignity, respect or shame—wriggling, scampering, quarreling, fighting, squealing, roaring, whining and hissing, as if in imitation of that horrible sea itself, these were those humans pledged to Chaos but not yet transformed by Chaos; creatures who doubtless had had little choice in their masters as Gaynor carried the banner of Count Mashabak out into this world. They were wretches now, however, and they had only their shame. They would not look up as Elric and his companions rode towards the looming shadow of *The Ship That Was*.

They would not answer the albino's questions. They would not listen when the sisters tried to speak to them. Terror and shame consumed them. They had already given up hope, even of an afterlife, for they reasoned that the misery they suffered surely proved that the entire multiverse had been conquered by their tormentors.

"We are here," said Elric at last, "to take prisoner Prince Gaynor the Damned and to hold him to account!"

Yet even this did not move them. They were used to Gaynor's deceptions, the games he had, in his moments of boredom, played with their lives and their emotions. To them, all speech had become a lie.

The seven rode to where a kind of drawbridge had been built into the body of the upturned ship and, without hesitation, they cantered inside, to discover a nightmare of murky galleries and ragged holes, where crude doors had been carved between bulkheads, all strung with shreds of net and rope and various roughly made implements, drying bits of cloth and rag, of tattered clothing and ill-washed linen, where lean-to shacks and teetering shanties were erected, often on the very brink of an injured deck. Something large and strong had pierced this ship and brought her to her end, rupturing her innards.

Through the portholes from deck to deck poured a foggy, unpleasant light, creating a lattice of pale and dark shadows within the ship's serpentine bowels, making the shapes of the inhabitants equally shadowy, like ghosts, crouching, skulking, coughing, wheezing, tittering, too despairing to look upon the living without increasing their already unbearable misery. The floor

of *The Ship That Was* was deep with human ordure, with discarded litter even they did not value. Wheldrake put a hand to his mouth and dropped down from Charion's horse. "Ugh, this is worse than the Stepney warrens. I'll let you go about your business. I have nothing useful to do here." And somewhat to Charion's surprise he returned to the comparative wholesomeness of that dark beach.

"It is true," said the Rose, "that he can do little that is practical. But his poetic inspiration is without parallel when it comes to tuning oneself to the harmony of the multiverse …"

"It is his most delightful quality," agreed Charion with a lover's enthusiasm, glad that what she admired in her beau was reflected in another's opinion—which went a short distance to disproving what lovers always suspect of themselves; that they have gone entirely mad.

Now Elric was losing patience with that conspiracy of the desperate and the dumb. As his warhorse stamped upon the filthy shingle, he drew the runesword out of its scabbard so Stormbringer's black radiance poured into that great, ruined space, and a dangerous murmuring song came out of it, as if it lusted for the soul of he who had tried to steal its energy.

And the warhorse reared up, pawing at the murky air; and the albino's scarlet eyes blazed through all that layered darkness, and he cried out the name of the one who had wronged them, who had created all this, who had abused every power, every responsibility, every duty, every treaty, every trust ever placed in him.

"Gaynor! Gaynor the Damned! Gaynor, thou foulest hellspawn! We have come to be revenged on thee!"

From somewhere high above, in what had once been the deepest and strongest parts of the ship, where the darkness was complete, came a distant chuckling that could only emanate from that faceless helm.

"Such rhetoric, my dear prince! Such bluster!"

Then Elric was finding a way for himself and his horse, crashing upwards into the shadows, through the trellises of misty light, up companionways which had once felt the feet of massive sailors and which were now all crowded and cluttered with the debris of these human inhabitants, knocking aside steaming pots and scattering fires, heedless of any damage, knowing that whatever materials constituted this hull it could not burn from mortal flames, the Rose close at his heels, shouting for the sisters and Charion to follow.

Riding through galleries of filthy darkness, where startled eyes stared for a second from a cranny or hunched figures skittered into ill-smelling holes; riding through this collection of hopeless souls, to seek their master and (all manner of entities and forces willing) free them from his tyranny! It was the Rose who now threw up her head in a clear, sweet song—a song which spoke, through its melodies, of lost love, lost lands and frustrated revenge—of a dedication to make an end to this particular injustice, this obscene perversion

in the order of the multiverse; the Rose who drew out her sword Swift Thorn and brandished it like a banner. Then the sisters, too, had drawn their blades—one of ivory, one of granite, one of gold—and were joining in with their own harmonies of outrage, determined that the cause of their despair should perpetrate no further harm. Only Charion Phatt sang no song. She was an inexpert rider and had fallen behind the others. Sometimes she looked back, perhaps hoping that Wheldrake had decided to follow after all.

They reached at last a pair of massive doors, their carvings so alien that they were, right or wrong way up, indecipherable to the mortals. Once these doors had guarded the quarters of whatever beast had ruled the ship and had been deep at the vessel's heart, but now they lay close to the roof from beyond which could be heard the slow booming of the heavy breakers.

"Perhaps," came Gaynor's amused tones again, "I should reward such folly. I sought to bring you here, sweet princesses, to show off my little kingdom to you, but you refused to come! Now curiosity brings you here, anyway."

"It is not curiosity, Prince Gaynor, which brings us to *The Ship That Was.*" Princess Shanug'a dropped from the horse she shared with her sister and went to push at one of the heavy doors, forcing it back a fraction—enough for them to pass through after they had all dismounted. "It is our intention to end your rule in this realm!"

"Brave words now, madam. Were it not for primitive earth-magic, you would be my slaves at this moment. Just as you shall be my slaves very soon."

The foggy air was thick with hot, unnatural odours and brands burned in it, scarcely casting better light than the flickering candles whose huge yellow stems dripped hissing wax upon what had once been an intricately carved roof but which was now covered in matted straw and rags. Webs were silhouetted in the air, hinting at the workings of enormous spiders, and from the deeper shadows came a scuttling that could only be of rats. Yet it seemed to Elric that all this was merely an illusion, a curtain which was being parted, for into view—and he was never sure how—came the fierce, rich, roiling colours of Chaos—a great sphere whose contents were in constant movement—and this displayed the dark outline of Gaynor the Damned, standing before it as if at some kind of altar on which he had placed some few small objects …

"Oh, you are most welcome," he said. He was half-crazed with delight at what he was sure must soon be their acceptance of his sovereignty. "There is little need for this display of challenges and insults, my friends, for I can surely solve our differences!" The helm pulsed now with a scarlet fire, shot through with veins of black. "Let us put an end to exuberant violence and settle these matters as wiser folk should."

"I have heard your reasoning tone before, Gaynor," said the Rose contemptuously, "when you tried to make my sisters bargain for their honour or their lives. I do not bargain with you, any more than did they!"

"Long memories, sweet lady. I had forgotten such a trifle and so should you. It was yesterday. I promise you a glorious rule in tomorrow!"

"What can you promise that we could possibly value?" said Charion Phatt. "Your mind is chiefly mysterious to me, but I know that you lie to us. You have all but lost your grip upon this realm. The power which aided thee, aids thee no longer! But you would make it aid thee, again …"

At this the great pulsing ectoplasmic sphere behind Gaynor flared and shivered and revealed, for an instant, three glaring eyes, tusks, drooling jaws and furious claws, and Elric realized to his horror that Mashabak was *not* free, that Gaynor had somehow kept control of the prison, appearing to do Count Mashabak's bidding while scheming to take the power of a Chaos Lord for himself!

Arioch had been banished from this plane, dragged through the dimensions by the last brave action of Esbern Snare, and Gaynor had been more audacious than any of them could imagine—he had determined that *he* should take the place of Arioch, rather than freeing his master! But though he held the Chaos Lord prisoner, he had no means of harnessing his power, of using it for his own ends. Was this why, with his leechblade, he had sought to steal the energy of Stormbringer and its sister swords?

"Aye," said Gaynor, reading his enemy's expression. "I had planned to gain the necessary power by other means. But I am a practical immortal, as thou must understand by now, and if I must bargain—why I shall happily go to market with thee!"

"You have nothing I need, Gaynor," said Elric coldly.

But the ex-Prince of the Universal was already mocking him, holding up one of the objects he had placed there and jeering softly. "Do you not want this, Prince Elric? Is this not what you have sought for so long? Across the realms, sir? With such considerable impatience, sir?"

And Elric saw that it was the box of black rosewood, its gnarled surfaces all carved with black roses. Even from here he could smell its wonderful perfume. His father's soulbox.

And again Gaynor jeered, louder now. "It was stolen by one of your sorcerer ancestors, given to your mother, then your father (who conceived his extraordinary deception once he understood what it was!), whose servant lost it! It was purchased, I believe, for a few groats by its owner in Menii. A pirate auction. Some small irony is to be enjoyed, I'd say …"

The Rose shouted suddenly, "You shall not bargain with us for that box, Gaynor!"

And Elric wondered why she had grown subtly more aggressive since they had entered those doors, as if she had rehearsed this moment, as if she knew exactly what she had to say and do.

"But I must, madam. I must!" Gaynor opened the box and drew out of it, between flickering blue finger and thumb, a great, lush crimson rose. He held it up by its dewy stem. It seemed to have been fresh-picked a moment

earlier. A perfect rose. “The last living thing in your land, madam! Save yourself, of course. The only other survivor of that particularly enjoyable victory. Like you, madam, it has survived all that Chaos could do to it. Up to now …”

“It is not yours,” said Princess Tayaratuka. “It is what the Rose gave us when she first knew of our plight. It was hers to give us. And ours to return to her. The Eternal Rose.”

“Well, madam, it is mine now. To bargain with as *I* choose,” said Gaynor with a hint of arrogant impatience, as if to a child who has not understood what has been explained.

“You have no right to those treasures,” said Princess Mishiguya. “Give me back the briar rings, which are my part of our charge.”

“But the briar rings are not your property,” said Gaynor, “as well you know, madam. All these treasures were loaned to you, so that you could go onto the paths between the realms and seek Elric.”

“Then give them back to me,” said the Rose, stepping forward. “For they were, indeed, my treasures to loan or to bestow as I chose. They are the last treasures of my forgotten land. I brought them here, hoping to find peace from my tormented cravings. And then came Chaos and my hostesses’ need was greater than my own. But now they have the swords they sought. They did not have to bargain, after all, with Elric. There’s another sweet irony, prince. And we are here to reclaim those treasures. Give them up to us, Prince Gaynor, or we must take them by force.”

“By force, madam?” Gaynor’s laughter grew louder at this, and coarser, too. “You have no force to use against me! To use against Mashabak! I cannot yet control him, perhaps. But I can *release* him! I can release him into your realm, madam, and have him gobble it up in an instant, and all of us with it. Aye, and it would delight me to do so, madam, almost as much as it delights me to control such power. For would it not be *my* decision which brought about the conquests of unbridled Chaos? This blackthorn wand will set him free—with one tiny tap of its tip.” And he revealed the thin, black branch that was bound with brass and elinfleur. “I repeat, madam, you have no force to use against me. While I remain here and my wand remains there, we are all of us safe as Arioch himself was safe when he made this cage …”

And suddenly there came a squawling and a roiling and a braying from the sphere and Count Mashabak’s unlovely features were pressed there for a moment as he raved in response to his captor’s name, at his absolute loss of honour in becoming the prisoner of a mere demi-demon. So vast and angry was the life-force imprisoned there that Elric and his companions felt driven back by it; felt as if they might be snuffed into non-existence by the very sight of it.

“And you, Prince Elric,” yelled Gaynor the Damned above the cacophony of his recklessly captured prize, “you, too, have come to trade, no doubt. What? Will you have this? The skin your fierce friend left behind?”

And he brandished the grey wolf's pelt that was all that remained of the tormented Northerner.

But to Elric it was no trophy Gaynor held. The abandoned wolfskin meant that Esbern Snare had died a free mortal. "I echo all the sentiments expressed by my friends," said Elric. "I do not trade with such as thee, Gaynor the Damned. There is no virtue left in thee."

"Vice alone, Prince Elric. Vice alone, I must admit. But such creative, *imaginative* vice, eh? You have yet to hear your choices. I want your swords, you see."

"They are our bond-blades," said Princess Mishiguya. "They are ours by blood and by right. They are ours to conquer thee and drive thee from our realm. Never shalt thou take them, Gaynor the Damned!"

"But I offer you those treasures you borrowed and lost, madam. I'll speak plain. I want four swords such as the four you have between you. I have here *six* Objects of Power. I will trade them all for the swords! Is that not generous? Even foolish?"

"You are insane, Gaynor," said Princess Shanug'a. "The swords are our inheritance. They are our duty."

"But it's *your* duty, madam, surely, to give back what you have borrowed? However, think upon that for a little. Now I am going to offer Elric his sweet old father's soul!" And he laid caressing steel upon the rosewood.

Angry at Arioch's betrayal of his secret, Elric could scarcely speak. Gaynor knew the true value of the soulbox and what it meant to Sadric's son!

"Would you be united—or would you be free?" Gaynor asked him, savouring every syllable of this temptation; understanding exactly what he offered the albino.

With a wordless oath, Elric lunged towards the altar but Gaynor motioned edgily with his wand and almost touched the ectoplasmic membrane where Count Mashabak roared and flexed his claws, his eyes seeming fierce enough to burn through those mystic walls and let him come rushing out, to devour, to warp, to make of this realm one screaming extrusion of tormented life.

"Your father's soul, Prince Elric, in return for that sword of yours. You know which you would rather have, surely? Come, Prince Elric, that's not a decision you must brood upon. Take the bargain. It releases you. It will free you from all thy dooms, sweet prince …"

And Elric felt the lure of it, the tempting prospect of being free for ever from his hellblade, from that unwanted symbiosis upon which he had grown to rely, of being free from the threat of his father's soul eternally merging with his own, of being able to help his father reach his mother in the Forest of Souls, where neither Law, nor Chaos, nor the Cosmic Balance had dominion.

"Your father's soul, Elric, for you to set free. The ending of his suffering and your own. You do not need the sword to live. You did not need

its power to find it, to brave those ordeals, and others. Let me have the sword, Elric. And I shall give you all these treasures …"

"You want the sword so that you can control the demon with it," said Elric. "Do you have a spell which will give you such power? Perhaps you do, Prince Gaynor. But the spell alone is not sufficient. You must be able to frighten Count Mashabak—"

Again that raging din, that squawling and screeching and threatening …

"—and you think you can do that with Stormbringer. But you would need more than Stormbringer, Prince Gaynor, to achieve such control!" And again Elric reflected on the wild audacity of Gaynor the Damned, who sought to tame a Lord of Hell to his own bidding!

"True, sweet prince." Prince Gaynor's tone was softer again, and amused. "But happily I have more than your sword. The Rose knows of the spell I mean …"

And the Rose lifted her head and she spat at him, which made him laugh all the more merrily. "Ah, how lovers learn to regret those little confidences …"

Which brought a sudden understanding to Elric and a fresh sympathy for the woman, the last of her kind, and the particular nature of her moral burden.

"Give me the blade, Prince Elric." Gaynor stretched out the gauntleted left hand in which he held the soulbox. In his right hand, the blackthorn wand hovered near the ectoplasmic membrane. "There is nought to lose."

"I would only gain, I think," said Elric, "if you were to let me go free with that thing."

"Of course. Who would be harmed?"

But Elric knew the answer to the question. His companions would be harmed. This realm would be harmed. Many more would be harmed once Gaynor controlled Count Mashabak. He did not know exactly how the Prince of the Damned intended to use the weapon to control the Lord of Chaos, but it was clear there was such a means. Once, long ago, the Rose had confided her secret, her knowledge of such a powerful old sorcery.

"Or would you join your sire for ever, Elric of Melniboné?" The tone from within the helm was cooler now, more evidently threatening. "I would even share my new power with you. Your sword shall be the stick I'll use to goad Mashabak to my bidding …"

Elric yearned to agree with Gaynor the Damned. If he had been a true Melnibonéan, even one like his father, he would have thought no more of the matter and given up the sword in return for the soulbox. But through whatever ties of character, blood and disposition they were, his loyalty was for his fellows and he would not consign one more human creature to the mercies of Chaos.

And so he refused.

Which brought a yell of rage from the ex-Prince of the Universal and he cried out that Elric was a fool, that he might have saved something from these realms, but now they would be entirely devoured by angry Mashabak …

… when there came a creaking and a groaning and a scattering of plaster and bits of stone, of candle-wax and falling flambeaux, as some ancient bilge-system, some trap-door in the hull, began to creak open from above and through the gap came a questioning croak.

It was Khorghakh the toad. It was the navigating monster from the ship, pushing its way through. It sniffed and turned its head. It saw Charion. Whereupon it gave a grunt of satisfaction and began swiftly to clamber down the carved walls while Elric, taking advantage of Gaynor's inattention, chopped suddenly across the makeshift altar and struck the wand from the prince's hand, then thrust at him again, while Gaynor grabbed for his own sword and flung a blow at the albino's head.

But now Stormbringer sent up such a fearful keening, a sharp, specific utterance of rage, that there came a gasp of pain from within the helm—a helm that had not known pain for millennia. Gaynor brought up his sword to try to block the runeblade, but staggered.

Then Elric drew back the point of his hellsword and drove it directly at that place in Gaynor's armour which would have hidden his heart—and the Lord of the Damned howled with sudden agony as he was lifted upward, like a lobster on a spike, his arms and legs flailing, roaring his rage as Count Mashabak still roared his—suspended, helpless upon Stormbringer's point—

"Where is there a hell that could effect thy just punishment, Gaynor the Damned?" said Elric through clenching teeth.

And the Rose said softly:

"I know of such a place, Elric. You must summon your patron demon. Summon Arioch to this realm!"

"Madam, you are mad!"

"You must trust me here. Arioch's power will be weak. It has not had time to build. But you must speak to him."

"What good can Arioch do us in this? Will you return his prisoner to him?"

"Call him," she said. "This is the way that it should be. You must call him, Elric. Only by doing that can any harmony be achieved again."

And so Elric, with his enemy Prince Gaynor squirming like a spider on a stick in front of him, called out the name of his patron Duke of Hell, a creature who had betrayed him, who had attempted to extinguish him for ever.

"Arioch! Arioch! Come to thy servant, Lord Arioch. I beg thee."

Meanwhile the toad had reached the floor and was lumbering towards Charion, towards its lost love, and there was a kind of soft affection in its face as Mistress Phatt approached it, stroking its huge hands, patting its scales, while from above came a thin voice:

"We were in time, it seems! The toad found this entrance for us." And

through the ruptured trapdoor came Ernest Wheldrake's head, looking down at them with some concern. "I was afraid we should be late."

Charion Phatt was patting the toad's enraptured head and laughing. "You did not tell us you had gone to bring extra help, my love!"

"I thought it best to make no promises. But I bring further good news." He looked at the route by which the toad had clambered, from carving to carving, to the floor and he shook his head. "I'll rejoin you as soon as I can." And he was gone.

"Arioch!" cried Elric. "Come to me, my patron!" But he could not offer blood and souls today.

"Arioch!"

And there, in one corner of this makeshift hall, a dark, smoky thing curled and shook itself and grumbled and then it had become a handsome youth, wonderful in his grace, but still not quite substantial. And the smile had all the sweetness of the hive. "What is it, my pet, my savoury …?"

The Rose said: "Here is your chance to bargain, now, Elric. What does this demon own that you would have from him?"

Elric, his eyes moving from Gaynor to Arioch, saw his patron peering, almost as if he were purblind, at the leaping ectoplasmic sphere, at the writhing Gaynor.

"Only his lease," said Elric, "upon my father's soul."

"Then ask him for it," said the Rose. Her voice was vibrant with controlled urgency. "Ask him to give up his claim on that soul!"

"He will not agree," said Elric. Even with the sword's mighty energy, he was beginning to tire.

"Ask him for it," she said.

So Elric called over his shoulder. "My Lord Arioch. My patron Duke of Hell. Will you give up your claim on my father's soul?"

"I will not," said Arioch, his voice sly and puzzled. "Why should I? He was mine, as thou art mine."

"We shall neither be thine, if Mashabak is freed," said Elric. "And that you know, my patron."

"Give him to me," said Arioch thinly, "give me my prisoner, who is mine by right, whom I ensnared with the power of my occult subtleties. Give me Mashabak, and I will give up my claim."

"Mashabak is not mine to give you, Lord Arioch," said Elric, understanding at last. "But I will give thee Gaynor to make that exchange!"

"No!" cried the Prince of the Damned. "I could not bear such ignominy!"

Arioch was already smiling. "Oh, indeed, sweet immortal traitor, you shall bear it and much else besides. I know fresh torments that are presently inconceivable to you but which you will look back upon with nostalgia, as a time before your agony really began. I shall bestow upon thee all the tortures I had reserved for Mashabak—"

Then the golden body had streaked towards the bellowing Gaynor, who begged Elric in the name of everything he held holy, not to give him up to the Duke of Hell.

"You cannot be slain, Gaynor the Damned," said the Rose, her face flushed with triumph, "but you can still be punished! Arioch will punish you and, as he punishes you, you will remember that you were brought to this by the Rose and that this is the revenge of the Rose upon you, for the doom you brought to our paradise!"

Elric began to realize that not all had been coincidence, that much of what had happened was the result of some long-nurtured plan of the Rose to ensure that Gaynor would betray no others as he had betrayed her and her kin. That was why she had come back here. It was why she had loaned the sisters the treasures of her own lost land.

"Go now, Gaynor!" She watched as the golden shadow embraced the writhing prince … seemed to absorb the whole armoured creature into itself, before flowing back again into its corner, and thence down whatever narrow tunnel through the multiverse Elric had created with his Summoning.

"Go now, Prince Gaynor, to your unsleeping eternal consciousness, to all those horrors you had thought familiar …" She spoke with considerable satisfaction, while the face of Count Mashabak pressed for a moment against the membrane and the fangs clashed and drooled as he sought a glimpse of his rival, bearing back, with something close to gratitude, his small prize to his own dimension.

"*I have no claim now, Elric, to your father's soul …*"

"But Mashabak?" said Elric as it dawned on him the responsibility they had brought upon themselves. "What shall we do with Mashabak?"

The Rose smiled at him, a gentle smile that was full of wisdom. "There is something yet we have to do," she said, and she turned to murmur to the three sisters, who took their swords—one of ivory, one of gold and one of granite—and with slow care placed a black briar ring upon the tip of each blade so that suddenly the swords were alive with glowing, flowery light—a calm energy—Nature's energy balanced against the raging power of Chaos. Then they lifted these swords in unison beneath the heaving membrane of that cosmic prison, so that each tip stood lightly upon the skin.

And Count Mashabak growled and threatened and spoke some words in a language known only to himself; made helpless by the very act of being captured, for he was a creature that had known almost limitless power and had no means of existing with the shock of its own enforced impotence. He knew not how to beg or bargain or even to coax, as Arioch coaxed, for his nature was more direct. He had reveled in the unchecked force of his power. He had grown used to creating whatever he desired, of destroying whatever displeased him. He screamed at them to release him, he grumbled, he subsided, as the tips of the swords continued to support the ectoplasmic sphere. He was a crude, brutish sort of demigod and knew only how to

threaten.

The Rose smiled. It was as if she were achieving everything she had dreamed of over the years. “He will take some taming, that demon,” she said.

If Elric had been disbelieving of Gaynor’s audacity, he was admiring of the Rose’s. “You knew all along how Mashabak could be controlled,” he said. “You manipulated events so that we should be here at the same time …” It was not an accusation, merely a statement of his understanding.

“I took the events that existed,” said the Rose simply. “I did what I could in my weaving. But I was never certain, even as Gaynor bargained with you for your father’s soul, what the outcome would be. I still do not know, Elric. Watch!”

She went to the table where Gaynor had placed his stolen treasures and she took the sweet-smelling rosewood box, advancing towards where the sisters held the sphere upon the tips of their swords, as delicately as if they balanced a soap-bubble, each woman concentrating upon her task while a strange, bubbling energy began to pulse along the blades. Down the ivory poured a smoky whiteness and down the granite a grey, curling substance; while the golden blade shook with light the colour of fresh-cut broom, all these colours spinning together and forming a kind of spiral which wound upwards again and back into the sphere.

Led by the Rose, the sisters began a chant, harnessing streamers of multiversal life-force and brought them together in a shimmering net of pale cerise light which surrounded them as they worked.

Then the Rose cried out to Elric. “Bring your sword now. Bring it quickly. It must be the conductor once more, of all this energy!” She opened the lid of the box.

The albino moved forward, his body making strange ritualistic gestures whose meaning was unknown to him.

He lifted the Black Sword even as it uttered a moan of protest, and he placed it between the other swords, at the very apex.

Carefully and slowly the Rose moved until she held the opened soulbox directly under the pommel of the runesword and cried: “Strike! Strike upwards, Elric, into the demon’s heart—!”

And the albino yelled in terrifying anguish as the hellforce poured from the Chaos Lord in response to his single thrust. And Mashabak’s unholy demon’s soul poured with a gush of dark radiance which sent Stormbringer to shivering and howling again, down the blade and into the soulbox the Rose held ready for it.

And it was only at that moment that Elric realized what, under the Rose’s direction, he had done!

“My father’s soul,” he said, “you have wed it to that demon’s! You have destroyed it!”

“Now we control him!” The Rose’s subtle pink skin glowed with her pleasure. “Now we have Mashabak. No mortal has the power to destroy him,

but he is our prisoner. He will remain so for ever! While we can destroy his soul. He is forced to obey. Through him we shall recreate the worlds he crushed." She closed the lid.

"How can you control him, when Gaynor could not?" Elric looked up to where, oddly passive, the demon count peered from his prison.

"Because now we possess his soul," said the Rose. "This is my satisfaction and my revenge."

Wheldrake emerged from beyond the scaly back of his rival in love. "It is not a very dramatic vengeance, madam."

"I sought resolution to my grief," said the Rose. "And we learned, my sisters and I, that such resolution is rarely achieved by further destruction. These two, besides, could never be destroyed. Yet, living, we have seen to it that they have served some useful purpose, the pair of them, and that is all I wished to bring about. To do positive good where positive harm had been done. It is the only possible form of revenge for such as myself."

And Elric, staring with growing horror at the soulbox, could not respond to her. He had been through all this, he thought, to fail at the very moment when he thought he had succeeded.

The Rose was smiling at him still. Her warm fingers were gentle on his face. He glanced at her, but he could not speak.

The sisters were lowering their swords. They looked drained and could barely replace the weapons in their scabbards. Charion Phatt, leaving the toad and Wheldrake, went to tend to them.

"Here." The Rose strode to the table and picked up the living bloom from where it lay upon the rosewood box which contained those three briar rings of power which had helped chain a demon's soul. She handed him the flower. There was dew upon the leaves as if it still grew in a country garden.

"I thank you for the keepsake, lady," he said quietly, but his mind was still full of the horror to come.

"You must take it to your father," she said. "He will be awaiting you in those ruins. The ruins where your people made their final pact with Chaos."

Elric did not find her humour amusing. "I shall be speaking to my father soon enough, lady," he said. With a deep sigh he sheathed his battle-blade. And he did not look into the future with any pleasure …

She was laughing. "Elric! Your father's soul was never in that box! At least, not trapped by it as the demon's is. The briar rings are for the bonding of a demon's soul. The box was built to *hold* a demon's soul. But the Eternal Rose is too delicate a thing to contain such a soul. It can only hold the soul of a mortal who has loved another better than itself. This flower protects and is nourished by your father's soul, Elric. That is why it lives. It is informed by all that is good in Sadric. Take it to your father. Once he has that, he can rejoin your mother as he longed to do. Arioch has forsworn all claim on him —and Mashabak has no power over him. *We* shall use the power of Mashabak. We shall force the Count of Hell to restore everything we loved.

And so, by turning this evil into good, we redeem the past! And that is the *only* way by which we mortals may ever redeem our pasts! It is the only positive revenge. Take the flower."

"I will take it to my father, lady," said Elric.

"And then," she said, "you may bring me back with you to Tanelorn."

He looked into her quiet, hazel eyes and he hesitated for a moment. "I would be honoured, lady," he said.

Suddenly Wheldrake's yelling: "The toad! The toad!" And the creature is crawling, on massive hands and feet, through the door of the chamber and out into the galleries, the ruined decks, where all the wretches released from their servitude to Chaos are running and scampering and fleeing —out of the great hull, flushed rabbits from a warren, and Wheldrake runs behind him calling "Stop, dear toad. Sweet rival! For the sake of our mutual love, stop, I beg thee!"

But the toad has turned now, at the entrance to *The Ship That Was*, and looks back at Wheldrake, looks back at Charion Phatt who also follows, and pauses, as if awaiting them. As they come closer, it waddles out of the hull and into the light, the humans running like lice around it, escaping back into the land no longer ruled by Chaos. And then it squats, waiting for them …

… Where Ma Phatt, unsteady in her swaying chair, is borne along the beach by her son and grandson, the pair of them sweating and exhausted as she yells at them to increase their speed, then sees her grand-daughter and Wheldrake and shrieks for them to stop. "My dolly-joys, my sweety-hearts, my jammy, juicy jolly-boy!" She discards the tattered parasol with which she has protected her wise old head and licks her lips at him; she ogles him. "My rock, my tasty wordsmith! Oh, how happy my Charion will be! How happy I would have been, had I but known you were in Putney! Put me down! Put me down, boys! We have arrived. I told you they were safe! I told you she had a machination or two, a twist in the cosmic fabric, a little smoothing out of the tangled sleeves. Sweet-rumped little coxcomb! Tiny reveler in rhyme! Come with me. We'll seek the End of Time!"

"A confusing place, as I recall," says Wheldrake, but he basks in her approval, her celebration of him, her pleasure at his joining her family.

"I told you we did not go far, Father!" declared Koropith Phatt a little too triumphantly, so that Fallogard Phatt caught his eye in a stern glare. "Although you, too, were right, of course, when you recognized this beach."

The Rose and the three sisters were emerging now, to greet their friends, but they carried only the soulbox. The metaphysically filleted Count of Hell was left within, to think for a little upon the nature of his fate, in which he would be forced to create everything that was anathema to him. In her left hand the Rose carried, so that it hung loose and dragged upon the shingle, the grey wolf pelt which Gaynor had sported, not knowing that it was a sign that, in some manner at least, Esbern Snare had been released from his particular burden.

"What?" said Wheldrake, a trifle surprised. "Do you take that as a trophy, madam?"

But the Rose shook her head gently. "It belonged once," she said, "to a sister of mine. The only other survivor of Gaynor's treachery …"

And only then did Elric understand the full import of the Rose's fate-weaving, of her astonishing manipulation of the fabric of the multiverse.

Ma Phatt was looking at her quizzically. "You have your satisfaction then, my dear?"

"As much as is possible," agreed the Rose.

"You serve a powerful thing," added the old woman, clambering down from her rickety litter and hobbling across the shingle, her red face alive with a variety of pleasures. "Do you call that thing the Balance, by any chance?"

But the Rose linked an arm in Ma Phatt's and helped her to sit upon an upturned bucket and she said: "Let us simply agree that I am opposed to all forms of tyranny, whether of Law or of Chaos or any other power …"

"Then it is Fate itself you serve," said the old woman firmly. "For this was a powerful weaving, child. It has made fresh reality in the multiverse. It has corrected the disruptions which upset us so badly. Now we can continue on our journey."

"Where do you go, Mother Phatt?" asked Elric. "Where will you find the security you seek?"

"My niece's future husband has convinced us that we should discover the kind of domestic peace we value in the place he knows called 'Putney'," said Fallogard Phatt with a kind of hesitant heartiness. "And so we shall all seek this place with him. He has, he said, an unfinished epic, in two volumes, concerning some local champion of his people. Which he left in Putney, do you see. So we must begin there, at least. We are all one united family now and do not intend to be further separated."

"I go with them, lady," said Koropith Phatt, grasping the Rose's hand quickly and kissing it, almost as if embarrassed. "We'll take the ship and the toad and cross the Heavy Sea again. From there we shall follow the pathways through the realms until, no doubt, we shall come inevitably to Putney."

"I wish you a safe and direct journey," she said. Then she too kissed his hands. "I will miss you, Master Phatt, and your expert tracking through the multiverse. There was never a better psychic bloodhound!"

"Prince Elric fled from that fateful strand,
Great hope had he in his heart,
From the sweet rose blooming in his hand,
No mortal could dispart …"

intoned the red-headed poet and then shrugged by way of apology. "I was not prepared, today, for epilogues. I had hoped only for a noble end. Come toad! Come Charion! Come family all! We sail again upon the Heavy Sea! For far-flung Putney and the golden bliss of happy domesticity!"

And there was something in the proud Prince of Ruins that yearned, as

he waved farewell, for the less dramatic adventures of the hearth.

Then he turned towards the Rose, that mysterious manipulator of destinies, and he bowed. “Come, madam,” he said, “we have a dragon to summon and a journey to make! My father is doubtless a trifle concerned for the well-being of his much-bartered soul.”

EPILOGUE

In Which the Prince of Ruins Honours a Vow.

Against the full heat of a harvest moon, Lady Scarsnout lifted her magnificent head to taste the wind, flapped her wings once to set her course and lifted away from that perpetuity of night where Sadric's ghost had hidden.

Elric had put the living rose into his father's pale hand. He had watched as the rose faded and died at last, no longer kept alive by the thing which had been hidden in it. And then Sadric had sighed. "I can hate thee no longer, son of thy mother," he said. "I had not hoped for so much as the gifts thou broughtest me."

And his father had kissed him with lips suddenly warm upon his cheek, with a momentary gesture of affection such as he had never made in life. "I will await thee, my son, where thy mother awaits me now, in the Forest of Souls."

Elric had watched the ghost fade away, like a whisper on the wind, and, looking up, he had realized that time was no longer stilled, and that Melniboné's bloody history, her ten thousand years of dominance, of cruelty and heartless conquest, was at the point of its beginning.

For a brief instant he had considered taking some new action—some action to change the course of the Bright Empire's progress down the centuries—to make of his race a gentler, nobler people—but then he had shaken his head and turned his back on H'hui'shan, on his past and on all brooding about what might have been, and he had settled himself into that natural saddle behind the dragon's shoulders and was calling confidently, with a new hope in his voice, for his mount to bear him skyward.

Then up they went together, dragon-leather slapping against the swirling clouds, up into the starry languor of a Melnibonéan night, into a future where, by a certain crossroads at the edge of time, the Rose awaited him.

For he had promised her that, when she first saw Tanelorn, she would be riding upon a dragon.